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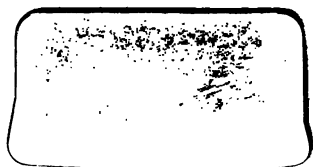
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BY GEORGE SOANE, B. A.

47.1687.



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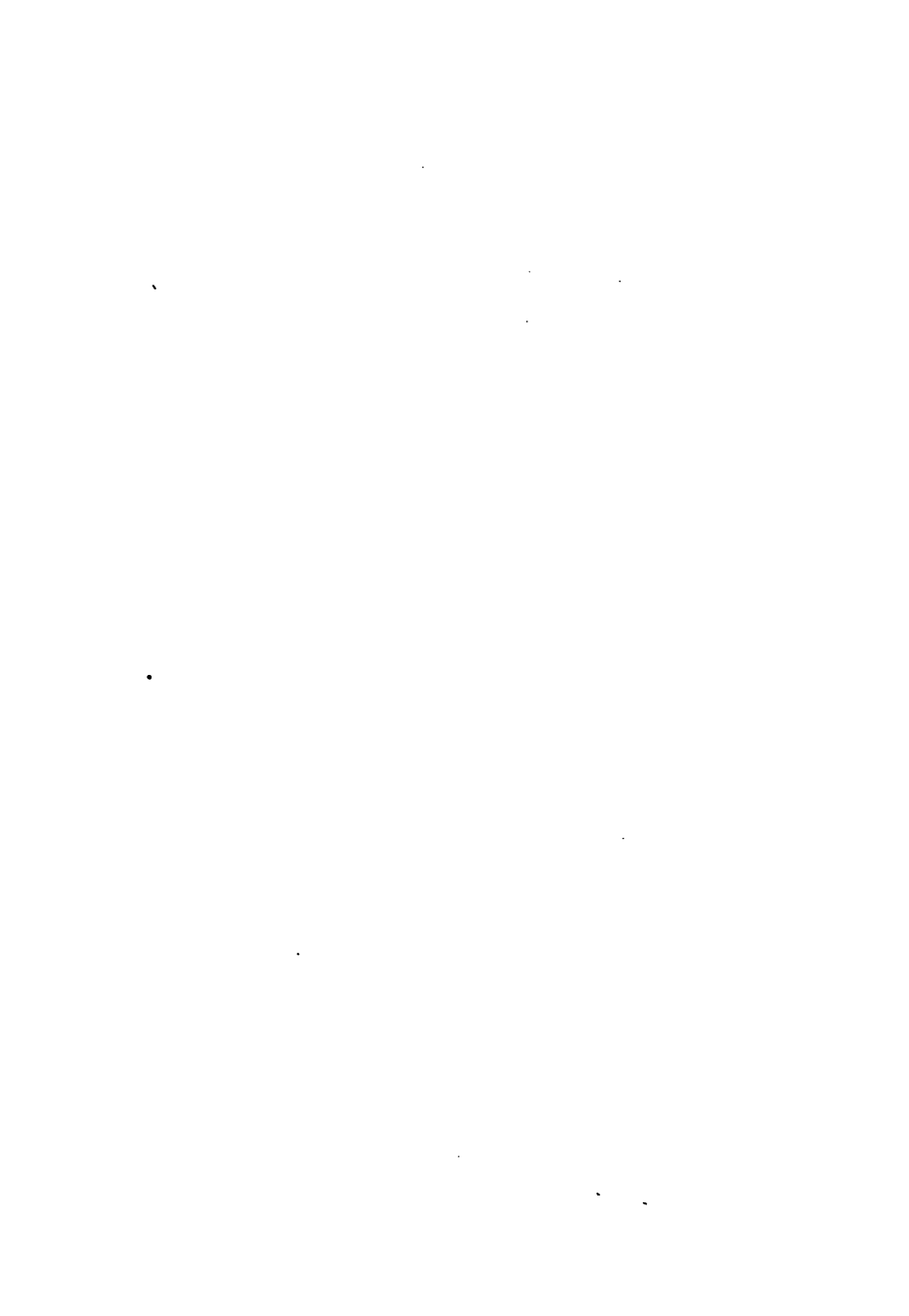
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JANUARY EVE.

A

TALE OF THE TIMES.

BY

GEORGE SOANE, B.A.

"It is the bright day that brings forth the adder."

SHAKESPEARE.

LONDON:

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1847.

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TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
THE LORD JOHN RUSSELL, M.P.
FIRST LORD COMMISSIONER OF HER MAJESTY'S
TREASURY, &c., &c.

IF your Lordship were distinguished only as the great and accomplished statesman, it might be thought irrelevant to submit a trifle of this kind to your notice ; but your Lordship, like the illustrious politicians of Italy in her palmy days, has been pleased at times "vacare musis," and hence I indulge the hope that this humble, but not the less sincere, tribute of admiration, may be considered as not altogether unworthy of acceptance.

I am, my Lord,

Your Lordship's obedient and devoted servant,

GEORGE SOANE.

P R E F A C E.

SOME friends have kindly warned me that if I were brought before a bench of critics upon a charge of having imitated the style of Dickens, it would go hard with me.

“Prisoner at the bar hold up your hand.—What say you to this charge?”

“Not guilty, my Lord Critic.”

Whereupon counsel first denies the imputed similarity altogether, for the said Charles Dickens is *inimitable*, and therefore cannot be imitated; and secondly, if such likeness do exist, he shows how, long before Boz delighted the town, his client did publish a certain tale called and nominated ROBIN GOOD-FELLOW, or, THE FROLICS OF PUCK, and also divers other tales, all in the style of *January Eve*; how then can he be the imitator?

But—to drop the legal metaphor—this is not the first time that I have come into collision with the

most popular writer of the day, greatly, I fear, to my own endamagement, as being the weaker vessel. A little tale of mine, the *Three Spirits*, was thought by many to be in its general scope and subject exceedingly like Boz's 'Christmas Carol;' yet the Carol was not published till some years after it. If then there be any imitation in the case at all, it is Boz—glorious Boz—who has taken a hint from my writings. And so be it. Honour enough for me to have ministered the least occasion for the workings of the master-spirit of the day.

Lastly, it has been suggested that this trifle has, or might be supposed to have, a political tendency. All I can say is, that nothing could well be farther from my thoughts, my object being moral, and not political—to show that while class is perpetually crying out against class, the fault all the while is in human nature; or, rather, in that misdirected education of the general mind, which cramps its best powers, and darkens it with prejudices.

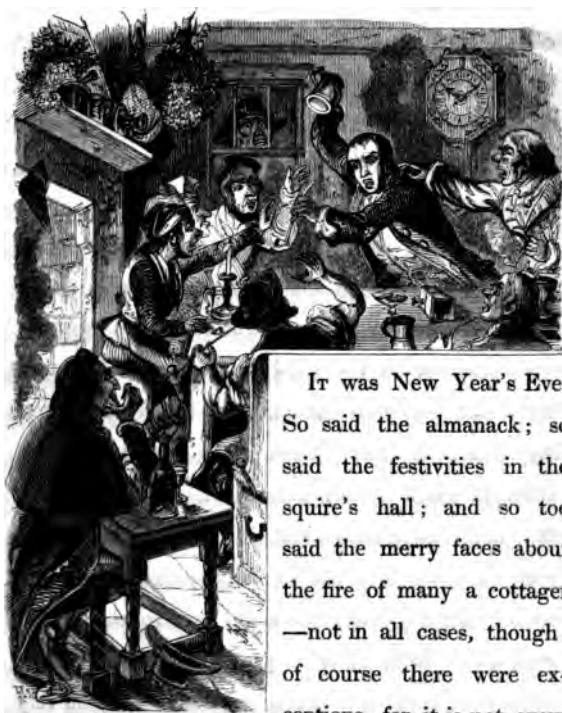
GEORGE SOANE.

Oct., 28, 1846.

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IT STRIKES TWELVE.



It was New Year's Eve.
So said the almanack; so
said the festivities in the
squire's hall; and so too
said the merry faces about
the fire of many a cottager
—not in all cases, though;
of course there were ex-
ceptions, for it is not every

one who knows how to be happy. Some folks, place them where you will, and as you will, must be miserable. Their nature is as perverse as that of certain little figures made for children to play with, which by reason of a quantity of lead in the usual site of brains will stand upon their heads, and can by no means be persuaded to use their feet. Oh, a great secret is the knack of being happy, and a mighty prize have they drawn in the lottery of life, who have got hold of it.

It was just the sort of night for the light-hearted possessors of this mystery to enjoy themselves in. Not that the night was fine, as many would understand the word; far from it; the snow lay a foot deep on the ground, and the clouds sweeping along in heavy black masses would scarcely allow the moon to show herself, while as to the stars, they might have taken their leave of the empyrean—gone out altogether, like so many sparks from a sky-rocket—for ought any one could have vouched to the contrary. Still, it is a great mistake to call a winter's evening dull. There is a coziness in the very

gloom ; the fire burns all the brighter for it ; and each gust of wind, as it moans over the open heath or amongst the leafless trees, has a music of its own—a music that sets the spirit within us dancing, as surely as the sound of pipe and tabor.

Some people, however, as I have just remarked, don't know how to set about being happy ; their nearest approach to the state is when they are grumbling, and such I fear was the case with a party assembled in the parlour of the Black Lion. Though the fire blazed as only a winter fire can blaze, though the ale was reasonably strong, and the tobacco all the better flavoured for not having come under the hands of the exciseman, still it was the general opinion of the company that they were a set of the most ill-used, miserable rascals possible. The word rascal, be it observed, had no reference whatever to any self-depreciation of their own moral, or other qualities, but to the way in which they were used by the rich and powerful, those insatiable tyrants of the land, who by some odd jugglery had got possession of every thing, fed

high, and slept soft, while the rest of the world were working for them.

A pleasant set of fellows were these liberals, and well worthy of a more intimate acquaintance. They were ten in number, seated about a long deal table, on which stood divers pewter-pots, scattered pipes, and a sort of magic tobacco-box, not uncommon in such places, from which it was impossible to extract your pennyworth of tobacco till you had dropt in your penny. From the huge beam over their heads hung a branch of misletoe, the chimney-piece was profusely adorned with holly, and the whole room gave tokens of having just undergone its annual purification in honour of the season, which was more than could be said for the greater part of the company. Their faces were in every shade of unwashed nature, from the deep grime of the blacksmith to the simple accumulation of dirt from air and exercise on the face of the labourer. The most distinguished of the set was evidently Tom, the poacher; the deference paid to him by his companions said so; his manner said so; and his whole appearance said so; for in truth he was a

man that you would scarcely have passed without looking at him a second time, had you met him in the parlour of a country inn, the centre of a common group possessing no mark nor likelihood. He was a strong-built fellow, somewhat above the middle height, with a remarkably square face, hard features, bushy eye-brows, and straight black hair, closely cropt about a large head, in which the organs of pride, obstinacy, discontent, love of power, and combativeness were preternaturally developed; at least they ought to have been, for he possessed these qualities in no ordinary degree; and if some of the many bumps upon his cranium did not indicate them, it was a great fault in the phrenologic science.

Then there was the village blacksmith, a sturdy knave, with a defying physiognomy, an inferior sort of Tom, with some of his dogged qualities, but without the natural shrewdness of his leader; the village cobbler, a short, broad-shouldered fellow, who would have been a merry companion enough, had he not spoilt his mirth by turning to politics; a little, hump-backed tailor, a parlous stickler for the rights of man, though ill-natured folks did say

that he never ventured to talk of them in the presence of his wife; the village barber, who, if there be any connecting species between man and his cousin-monkey, certainly belonged to it; and five others there were, manifestly of inferior note, since the parish annals have left no record of them; while the landlord in person occupied a chair as an honorary member.

Apart from these worthies, and totally unconnected with them or their doings, was an old gentleman, not perhaps the exact counterpart of *Me-phistophiles*, but with a certain sort of family likeness to that distinguished personage as he appears in *Retsch's* outlines—quite enough, in fact, to make you pause, and rub your eyes, and look at him again and again to be sure there was no mistake. So far as could be seen through the cover of the cloak, which it was his pleasure to keep on, though sitting close by a good fire, he was thin as well as tall. His features were small, sharp, and intelligent, and his grey eyes twinkled brightly, but whether with mirth or malice it would have been hard to determine. There was the same ambiguous expression,

too, in the smile, or sneer—you could not tell which—that was constantly playing about his lips, as from time to time he stole a furtive glance at the assembled orators. The puzzle was yet greater when you attempted to speculate upon his age. At the first glance you might, perhaps, pronounce him to be hard upon seventy; you looked again, and either he, or your powers of vision, had undergone a wonderful change—he could not be an hour above fifty. And so it was every time you turned your eyes upon him; you had always either to take away, or to add a dozen years to your calculation of the minute before.

And what on earth could have induced this singular personage to set up his pilgrim-staff, even for a night, in the parlour of the Black Lion?—why did he not go on to the town, where, as the post-boy might, and no doubt did, inform him, there was a decent inn with good entertainment for man and horse? it was only a quarter of a mile off, and the chaise, which had brought him thus far, might surely have carried him that little

distance farther. Was he the fisherman of souls, who held the parlour of the Black Lion to be a good fishing-ground, and had he in consequence come thither to cast his nets? Patience, gentle reader, and you will learn all in fitting time; there shall be no secret between us, I promise you, if you only can make it convenient to go on with me to our journey's end.

The very ambiguous character I have thus been attempting to describe, was seated by himself at a small square table, which, for his better accommodation had been drawn up close to the fire. Here, without seeming to notice any one, he sipped his wine in silence, greatly to the indignation of Poacher-Tom, who looked upon any familiarity with so exclusive a liquor in the light of an aristocratic interference with the sacred rights of man. As, however, each and every sort of drinking was clearly to the advantage of the landlord, and he was a potentate not lightly to be offended in his own domains, and least of all by those who had long scores running against them, Tom, instead of ven-

turing a decided attack upon the silent guest, thought it would be more prudent to generalize his opinions.

"What infernal weather!" he began; "it's my belief the rich ones pay our almanack-makers to bespeak it, on purpose to plague those who have less gold and more honesty than themselves."

"Here's confusion to the whole lot of them," cried the blacksmith. "I only wish as how they'd all got one head, and that one war a-laying on my anvil. I'd soon see what a' war good for."

"Good for!" retorted the poacher; "just nothing, and take your change out of it."

"But I say, neighbour," broke in the village cobbler, "about this here weather—do you really think the great folks make it? tell us now, for you've the longest head in the parish."

"Why, if they didn't make it, they have done as bad," replied Tom; "they have cheated us of our birth-right."

"And what may that same birth-right be?" asked the cobbler.

"The right to eat and drink as they do—the right to hunt and shoot as they do—the right to work as little, and play as much, as they do—the right to do what we please, and when we please."

"I should like that hugely," interrupted the cobbler.

"The right," continued the orator, warming with his own eloquence, "the right to have broad lands, and fine houses, instead of sitting in a hole like this, drinking muddy ale, and—"

"Holla, Tom," exclaimed the landlord; "draw it mild, will you; I won't stand no reflections on my stablishment from no one."

"Why, you don't mean to say this kennel of yours is a bit like the Squire's hall, do you?"

"May be I don't—what then?"

"A deal table, though it may have been scoured, an't polished mahogany, is it?"

"May be not—what then?"

"Bread and cheese an't roast beef and plumb-

pudding, and a sandy floor an't quite so soft as a Turkey carpet ?”

“ May be not—what then ?”

“ What then ?” repeated Tom indignantly ; “ why then we have as good a right to these things as they have—aye, and a ten times better right, for we it is who make every thing and do every thing. It would be long enough before any of them ploughed the land.”

“ Or made a pair of boots,” said the cobbler.

“ Or a coat,” said the tailor.

“ Or roofed in one of their fine houses,” said the tiler.

“ Or wrought a single horse-shoe,” said the blacksmith.

“ True, neighbours,” continued the orator ; “ if we wouldn't work for them any longer, the lazy hounds would starve.”

“ And why do we work for them ?” asked the cobbler ; “ that's what always puzzles me.”

“ Because we can't help ourselves. Because they are tyrants, and we are slaves. Because they are

rich, and we are poor. Because they have jails, and treadmills, and soldiers to cut us down, and Jack Ketches to hang us. Because we haven't the heart to right ourselves, and break the necks of every one of them as we should do if there were a grain of spirit among us."

General shouts of "Bravo! well said, Tom!" together with a rapping of pewter-pots upon the table, followed this eloquent appeal.

And the silent guest?—Oh, he certainly must have been Diabolus; no merely mortal could have smiled as he did just then.

"Yes!" began the blacksmith, when the tumult of applause had subsided, "it's enough to make a man swear himself blue to see how things go on, and we all the while paying such sights of money to the Queen and her two parliaments—a big house, and a little house—to look after matters, and keep all right and tight. Now there's the short cut through Taunton-Hall park—"

"Saves half-a-mile about, on market-day," interrupted the cobbler.

"That's just what I was going to say, neighbour, only you takes the word out of my mouth."

"Didn't mean no offence," said the cobbler.

"Well, the landlord, Lord Mowbray, has gone and stuck up a board, threatening to persecute any one, who doesn't keep the high-road. Now I only axes, why doesn't the Queen look arter this here? or, if she can't leave the young ones in the *nursery*, why doesn't she send down one o' them parliament chaps, and set all right in no time?"

"I hear though," said the barber, "some talk as how young Lord Mowbray war going to sell the 'state by private con—*coz* something, but I don't exactly recollect the rights of it."

"Contract, you mean," said Tom contemptuously; "private contract. And what good will that do us, I should like to know? a landlord's a landlord, old or young, tall or short; what one does, the other does; and as for this new chap, whoever he may be, depend upon it he'll distrain for rent, and transport for what he calls poaching, just like the rest of them."

"I doubt but you have hit the right nail on the head," cried the blacksmith.

"That he has," said the cobbler. "Leave Tom alone for getting to the rights of our wrongs. There's not another in the whole shire can do it like him."

"That all comes of his being heddycated," said the blacksmith; "if I had any how had Tom's heddycation, I'm blest if I hadn't been a general, or a Lord high-chancellor, by this time!"

"What!" exclaimed Tom with looks of infinite disgust, "do you mean to say you would be a tyrant, if you could? a trampler on the rights of man? a hired cut-throat? a fellow that helps to make game-laws, and poor-laws, and corn-laws, and treads on the people as if they were no better than so much dirt."

"I didn't mean to say that exactly," replied the blacksmith, somewhat abashed at this comment on his estimate of the value of education, "so you needn't take up a fellow so short; but you can't deny you've had your advantages."

"I don't mean to deny them ; if my old fool of a father hadn't turned bankrupt, and thought proper to die when I was scarcely fifteen years old, I should have been a—"

Tom brought himself up with a sudden jerk, like a horse at a leaping-bar, which he has no mind to venture over. But his crony, the blacksmith, was no fool, and easily guessing the cause of his hesitation, exclaimed with a loud laugh—

"Why, I say, neighbour, you had almost put your foot in it ;—devilish nigh you were making a tyrant of yourself ; I wouldn't be so near a waggon-wheel, when it's going down hill, for something."

What patriot could tamely submit to such an insinuation ? And Tom was a patriot—a genuine patriot. Accordingly he started up with a furious imprecation, and the pewter-pot in his hand ready to hurl at the head of the audacious speaker.

"Do you mean to say that I want to be one of the rascally aristocrats ?"

"Why now I'll be judged by any gentleman here if I said anything of the sort," replied the

blacksmith; "but you get so cantankerous there's no abearing you."

"Order! order!" shouted the landlord, who, on every account, was interested in maintaining the Queen's peace and his own in the domains under his government. Tom, however, was much too elevated by wrath to listen to him.

"If any man—but he is not a man—he's a beast—if any beast thinks such a thing of me, let him out with it at once, and if I don't knock his head into next week, and the week after it too, may I be—"

"Order! order!" repeated the landlord in the loudest key of a voice at no time very gentle; and the cry being taken up by those around—as indeed any other cry would have been—the blacksmith, for some time in vain attempted to get a hearing. At length it was discovered from his looks and gestures that he had no hostile intentions; and then the call for "order" was exchanged for a cry of "hear! hear—hear the jolly blacksmith."

"If I've said anything," began the orator, "what

isn't the thing, I humbly axes pardon, and you all knows I wouldn't say that ere if I didn't mean it. I've fought my man before to-day, and licked him too, and so it an't for that I says it. But I loves Tom like my brother, and he knows it—nobody better. And what if I did say he were nigh being rich, and all that sort of thing,—I meant no harm by it—quite contrarywise. I only wish as how he was squire this here moment—'cause why?—cause he an't no tyrant—'cause if he had the cash, he'd let us have our share, every man Jack of us, like a true Briton as he is ;—'cause he'd make gentlemen of us all, and no one wouldn't have nothing to do but to sit and drink, and be as merry as the day wer' long. Give us your hand, Tom ;—may this beer be my *pison*, if I think there's an honest fellow living, look for him where you will."

Tremendous applause followed this eloquent harangue. The wounded honour of Tom was made all whole again, and the conversation fell into its usual train of discussion, when the returning harmony was disturbed by the appearance of that alarming

functionary, Mr. Nupkins. It was evident too that he was on duty, for he had on his beadle's gown, wore his beadle's cocked hat, and wielded his beadle's staff, that awful emblem, which more peculiarly vouched for his high office, and, when needed, could help to maintain its authority, as many a poor vagrant's head could bear witness. Even if these significant types and tokens of hostile intent had been wanting, there was an official frown upon his face that could not be mistaken; it told, as plainly as any words could do, that the wearer thereof knew he had an important task before him, and would do his duty to the utmost.

At the sight of this agent of arbitrary power, there was a general stir amongst the assembly; every one, except the silent guest, who continued sipping his wine with much composure, started up as if he thought the visit must be personal to himself,—a conviction which manifested itself differently according to the different degrees of courage then present. Some three or four looked fierce and marvellously inclined to resent the slightest infringe-

ment upon their general or individual liberties; but the rest, it was too plain, quailed before the tyrant-beadle, or to borrow the energetic language of Tom and his brother-patriots, they indubitably showed more or less symptoms of the white feather. Mr. Nupkins, however, having glanced round the room with a searching eye that evidently comprehended every offender, relieved them of their separate fears by addressing himself to the landlord.

"Do you know," began the functionary in his most awful and impressive tones, "do you know what you is a doing of, Giles Hammer? do you know as how you is hacting *agin* the statues, and that the law has pervided pains and penalties for all sich offenders? What does the parliament say?—above all, what does the squire say? hasn't he ordered you, scores of times by word of mouth—that is by my mouth—to shut this here public-house at eleven o'clock?—eleven o'clock percisely, Giles Hammer, and it's now ten minutes arter."

"But New Year's Eve, Master Nupkins," replied the landlord; "you forget it's New Year's Eve."

"I never forgets nothing," retorted the beadle with additional pomp, if that were possible; "I never forgets nothing; and if you don't turn them fellers out, and shut up house, I shan't forget to tell his worship on you to-morrow morning."

"Fire and fury!" muttered the poacher.

"What's that I hear?" exclaimed the horrified beadle; "some one swore, and in my presence. I'll be on my oath a' did."

"Why, you mealy-mouthed hound, would you have no one swear but yourself and the squire? Curse these tyrants! if they knew how to get hold of the sun, they would pretend he was all their own, and hang any of us poor fellows for stealing, as they'd call it, a pennyworth of daylight."

"That they would," said the blacksmith, who seemed to be hugely tickled by this happy illustration of aristocratic tyranny; "that they would; and tax the moon and stars into the bargain."

"No bad tax either," muttered the village chandler, with an eye to the increased sale of candles that would result from it.

"I tell you what it is," continued the poacher—

"Now do be quiet, Tom," interposed the land-lord.

"What ! give up the rights of man ? let that fellow there in his cocked hat and his slave's livery trample on Magna Charta ?—if I do I'm a nigger."

The afflicted beadle put up his hands to both ears that they might not admit the odious sounds, and the internal purity of their owner be contaminated.

"You had better be off, Tom," urged the land-lord ; "it's getting late."

"Be off?" shouted the poacher ; "why you're the biggest slave, the vilest worm, the—holla ! you there—you beadle fellow—Nupkins—what do you call yourself?—answer me, and no lies, mind you ; is the party at the squire's broke up yet?"

"No, it an't," replied the beadle, with as much anger as he dared to show ; "and what's more, it won't be for the next three hours ; they were only just a-setting down to supper when I came away."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said the poacher.

"Yes, that's all about it, and no mistake."

“Why then, do you just take my compliments to the squire—Tom Starlight’s compliments—and tell him, that what’s good for him is good for us; when he shuts up shop, we’ll do the same; but not a minute before.”

The beadle’s cocked hat fairly rose upon his head with surprise and horror. Such audacity as this went far beyond all his previous experience of radical daring, and awful visions began floating up to his mind’s eye—dim shadows of rebellion and riot-acts, and charges of cavalry sword in hand, with a perspective view of the gallows, and some dozens of the rabble in white night-caps, waiting for their turn to be hanged. Mine host, alarmed for the probable consequences on the next quarter day, thought it high time to interfere more vigorously than he had hitherto done.

“This won’t do, Tom—Thomas Starlight, this won’t do. It an’t the thing no how, and it’s I ~~that~~ tells you so. What the devil!—Heaven forgive me for swearing—do you think I’ve a mind to lose my license?”

“As you sartinly will,” groaned Mr. Nupkins.

“I hopes not,” replied the landlord; “and I don’t believe it neither; I don’t believe as how a ’spectable man like yourself, neighbour, and one we’ve all sich a regard for, would go for to demean himself by turning informer.”

“It’s my *dooty*,” said the beadle, in a faint tone; “England expects every man to do his *dooty*.”

“Does it!” cried Tom, “then it’s mine to knock your head off;” and forward he rushed to discharge himself of this moral obligation. He would have done it, too, in the most sufficient and satisfactory manner, had not the landlord interposed a body of genuine publican dimensions between the parties.

“Don’t you think it, Tom; nobody shan’t strike my waluable friend, Mr. Nupkins, while I stands by. Mr. N., take a glass of elder pop; ’twill keep out the cold; and then we’ll all say good night.”

The beadle looked very white, and shook his head; he saw his authority set at nought, and, of course, he was very angry; but he was also very much afraid;

and before he could decide between the two impulses, a large goblet of elder wine was smoking in his hand, the fragrance whereof, joined to the landlord's affectionate entreaties, effectually turned the balance. He sipped, then smiled, then took a deep draught, and the cup was empty.

"Try another," said the landlord.

"Not a drop," replied the beadle, firmly. "I must be jogging, and so too will your visitors if they takes my advice."

"In course they will, Mr. Nupkins, and much obliged to you for telling on 'em. Now, gentlemen, you hear what our good neighbour says."

At this intimation all the guests, except Tom, trooped off in a body. That determined advocate of the rights of man had flung himself into an arm-chair, with every appearance of having made up his mind not to move for any one, or for any cause, save his own good pleasure. Coriolanus standing on the Volscian hearth, or Marius among the ruins of Carthage, could hardly have presented a finer picture of heroic determination. His looks alone were

quite sufficient to make the beadle abandon all idea of taking upon himself the perils of a forcible ejection; so he whispered the landlord in his ear to get rid of the brute as soon as he could. To this the latter replied by a sagacious nod; the man of authority departed, and the three principal personages of the scene were left alone by themselves.

“Come, Tom, my good fellow,” said the landlord, in his blandest tones; “I’m sure you don’t want to get me into trouble.”

Tom made no answer. He only scowled till his beetle-brows fairly met, while, from the convulsive clutching of his hands, it might be suspected that he still retained a strong desire to knock down somebody. The landlord, who well knew the temper of his guest, and, being equally prudent with the beadle, had no mind for any warlike demonstrations, was puzzled what to say or do next. He saw plainly enough that a single unlucky word might make the vessel of his wrath boil over, and it was no easy matter, as things then stood, to pick out one from the whole

dictionary that would not be unlucky. He was spared, however, the hazard of such an experiment.

“Landlord!” cried a loud, shrill voice, and seemingly so close to his ear, that it made him start. In his surprise, he looked about the room to see from what quarter it could possibly have come, when he encountered the keen glance of the stranger. As he used often in after times to tell his cronies, the old fellow’s eyes gleamed marvellously like those of a wild beast at feeding-time ; and it was with some perturbation of spirit that he asked,

“Did you speak, Sir?”

“Yes; shut the outer door there, and now leave the room.”

“Certainly, Sir. Now, Mr. Thomas; if you’ll be good enough to be moving, I’ll shut up house. The gentleman sleeps here.”

Before the poacher could either accept or decline this invitation, so often repeated, the old man interfered.

"Mr. Thomas Starlight will remain; I have something to say to him."

"I beg your pardon, Sir; did I understand you right?" said the landlord.

"Quite so, if you understood that I wanted your absence."

The landlord, curious as he was, ventured on no further questions. As if he had been treading amongst eggs, or were actually going to rob his own house, and feared to wake the sleepers, he stole out on tiptoe, and, to own the truth, was not particularly sorry when he closed the door behind him. The two strange companions were alone. Even the Dutch clock seemed to be conscious that such was the case, and ticked in a low, hesitating manner.

"I like you," said the old man; "you think exactly as I do."

Tom was silent.

"Did you hear me, sirrah?"

"I am not deaf," replied Tom, in his most independent tones.

"Attend then; you had better. There are

worse things to deal with than squires or beadles. Look at me."

In spite of his republican spirit, Tom could not help complying with the mandate so unceremoniously given. He did look; and thought if the devil ever walked abroad in the disguise of humanity, it would be with just such a face, a notion that made him anything but comfortable. In fact, there was a sensible diminution of his usual rampant spirit, though he might himself have been puzzled to tell why it should be so.

"Well?" cried the old man, after having allowed him a reasonable time for observation, "for what do you take me?"

Tom hesitated. The word that rose to his lips, prudence—and he had grown on the sudden wonderfully prudent—thrust back again; so he replied, that he took him for a gentleman.

"The devil is a gentleman, is he not?" said the mysterious guest, with a peculiar twinkle of his little bright eyes. "I rather think an old acquaintance of mine, one Will Shakespeare, says something

like it. Oh, I remember now ; ‘ the prince of darkness’—meaning, I won’t say who—‘ the prince of darkness is a gentleman.’ That’s more than can be said for many princes of my acquaintance ; sad rubbish, most of them—eh, Tom ?”

One of the devil’s family quoting Shakespeare ! Tom gasped, as well he might, in utter amazement.

“ A fine, independent fellow was that Shakespeare, just of your own way of thinking, Tom ; stole the squire’s deer, and kissed the keeper’s daughter no leave asked. But I’m forgetting all this while, you can’t know any thing about him.”

“ Can’t I ?” exclaimed Tom, old recollections stirring within him at the remark, and making him more like his real self than he had been for any time during the last five minutes. “ I’ve been an actor.”

“ But you never played the tyrant’s part ?” said the old man, bending his eyes sternly on him, and frowning till his brows met ; “ you never, even in sport, wielded the sceptre of oppression ?”

"Of course not," replied Tom boldly—it was not true, though—"the manager wanted to make a slave of me, and so I left them."

"And you did right, very right; I like you, Thomas Starlight; you're a man of spirit, a man after my own heart. Ah, if there were a few more like yourself in the world, it would be a pleasant place to live in. There would be no game-laws then—"

"By no means," said Thomas, hastily.

"No excisemen—"

"You may take your oath of that."

"No enclosing of commons, no beadles, no lawyers—"

"Nor squires; I'd hang every one of them."

"No tyranny of one man over another; the peasant would be as free in his cottage as the landlord in his hall."

"Ten times freer."

The old gentleman looked wistfully in his face.

"But will you always think so? would not

fortune change you as it has changed so many others ?”

Tom was sure that it would not ; in token whereof he smote the table fiercely, and was about to confirm his position with an oath, when, luckily recollecting the doubtful nature of his companion, he broke off at the first plunge. It is strange how superstitious some folks can be, even when they have shaken off the trammels of religion.

“Humph !” said the old man, as much to himself as to his intended *protégé* ; “I have tried the experiment fifty times, and ever found it fail me. Fifty times, do I say ? a hundred times have I made the poor, rich—the weak, powerful—and in so doing have only added to the number of the oppressors. Once more, however, and for the last time.”

Tom thought it odd the devil—if it really were the devil—should have such a fancy for moralizing. He had, however, held out something like an intimation of having money to give away, and Tom, catching eagerly at the bait, exclaimed :

“I wish some one would try me.”

"I will," replied the stranger.

"What! give me gold—house—land—make me able to hold up my head with the squire?"

"All—in the hope that you will be what you now are—a friend to the rights of man."

"You must be monstrous rich," said Tom, doubtfully.

"I am wise, and wisdom can enrich others, though it often leaves the owner of it poor enough. You are not very nice where the money comes from, I suppose, so long as it does come?"

"Not a bit of it," exclaimed Tom.

Again the old man smiled one of his peculiar, unpleasant smiles, at the same time drawing forth a morocco case, from which he took a small leaf—a leaf, that is, in shape, for in substance it looked not unlike a piece of gold-beater's skin, all powdered over with hieroglyphics. As he held it by the stem, it gently wavered under the impulse of the air, and at each motion these cabalistic characters changed both form and colour as often and capriciously as the miscellaneous fragments in a kaleidoscope;

the eye could not fix them for a single instant.

"This wood-fire burns luckily for our purpose," said the old man. "Come hither and kneel down."

Tom did not move: perhaps it was a superstitious fear came over him; perhaps he doubted the old man's power, or thought he was only laughing at him. But his hesitation did not last long. On a sudden he slapped his thigh with the air of a man whose mind is made up, muttered something very like a half-strangled oath, and knelt as he was ordered.

"Hold the leaf in your right hand, place your left upon your heart, and say after me:—

"Spirit of ethereal flame,
Whom I love, but may not name.
On this leaf from Eden's tree
Is the bond 'twixt you and me.
Take it to thyself, and do
What thy compact binds thee to,
Ere the stars again have met,
Ere the sun shall rise and set."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth, than the clock began to strike twelve, and somehow Tom thought it never before had sunk upon his ear with such a harsh, jarring sound. It was absolutely unpleasant; and he was not made more comfortable by the old man's silently counting every stroke upon his fingers, and seeming particularly to call his attention to the time. As the last vibration was dying away, his strange companion made a sign to him to throw the leaf into the fire, and glad enough was he to get rid of it, for he almost fancied that it grew hotter and hotter in his hand. A sharp crack followed, like the report of a pistol, and then a bright, green flame shot up, which soon assumed the form of a tree with little blueish sparks for buds. For about a minute these last kept constantly dropping off and being succeeded by fresh ones, till at last the whole sank down and became a portion of the burning embers.

It might have been by mere accident that the storm burst forth at this particular moment; or

it might have been that the leaf was in truth no ordinary leaf, but a veritable epistle addressed to the elementary spirits, who were acknowledging the receipt of it after their own boisterous fashion; certain it is, that such a squall came down, without the least warning, as actually carried away all the chimney-pots, and showed a very strong disposition to take the house with them. It pulled hard at the roof, tugged at the doors and casements till they rattled again, and dashed the sleet against the windows with a force that threatened not to leave a single pane of glass whole in another minute. This violent storm, however, died away no less suddenly than it had risen; and the moon surged out again with a sort of melancholy splendour, her brightness seeming to be saddened, though it could not be dimmed, by what was passing in the world below her.

Tom peered about him in the full confidence that so much uproar could not be without a corresponding result. But, no: the burning logs had not been

changed into bars of gold, nor could he perceive the least sign of money-bags in any corner of the room. He looked up in the old man's face to learn the meaning ; but the only explanation to be read there was exceedingly hieroglyphical, being the peculiar satanic smile, already noticed, which, though not actually a sneer, came very near to it—so near, indeed, as to be easily mistaken for one. Finding he could make nothing of it, Tom gave up the attempt, and in no good humour was about to remark that he had often seen a conjuror do as much at a fair for two-pence, when the old man actually seemed to read his thoughts before he had time to utter them.

“So you think me an impostor, do you? well, we shall see. Go home with you.”

“Home!” echoed Tom, indignantly; “And where’s all the gold and the lands you were to give me in such a hurry?—have they gone home before me?”

“So sure as the clock strikes nine to-morrow, they will find you.

The seed is sown ;
When the plant is grown,
The tree by its fruit will sure be known."

"But do you mean—"

"I mean to answer no more questions to-night.
Home with you—home!"

And taking up the only lamp, the old man slowly walked off to his bed-room, leaving Tom to his own meditations by the expiring fire-light. For a few minutes that independent gentleman was greatly in doubt whether it might not be as well to follow, and drub a more satisfactory answer out of his new friend. But the growing darkness, as the burnt-out logs fell together, inclined him to more pacific counsels, and he prudently made up his mind to give the old man's tree, whether real or only metaphorical, the required time for coming to maturity.

"It's not very long till nine to-morrow," he muttered ; "and then—"

He did not finish the sentence, nor was it at all requisite ; his gesture spoke as plainly as any words could do, "mind you keep your promise, old boy,

or most certainly I shall keep mine : and *that* is to break every bone in your body."

What Tom's dreams were on this eventful night, when he sought his pillow, history has neglected to record; no doubt they were pleasant: probably of golden heaps, and well-timbered lands, and amiable old gentlemen, with flowing white beards: whatever they may have been, he was still fast asleep, though a bright winter-sun had been shining into the room for an hour or more, when a tapping at his door, at first gentle, but gradually increasing in vigour, dispelled these visions.

"What's the matter?" cried Tom, as yet only half awake.

"Nothing's the matter," replied a soft, musical voice; "only it's well nigh eight o'clock. I was afraid you were ill."

"Bother!" growled Tom; "if you had nothing else to tell me, I wish you had stopped away till you had been wanted. I shan't get up 'till nine."

There was a short pause, when the same voice spoke again, but rather more timidly than before:

"Tom!"

"Well, what now? why don't you take yourself off?"

"Breakfast is ready," replied the voice.

"Then let breakfast wait till I am. I've often enough waited for breakfast, and it did not come after all."

At this retort, a quick ear might have detected the trip, trip of a single pair of small and delicate feet along the passage—for small and delicate they must have been by the sound. A lover, or indeed any young man of imagination, would have found a music in their light echo; but Tom was a young man without imagination, and, moreover, his head just then was fully taken up with the events of the preceding evening and the prospects growing out of them; there was positively not an unoccupied corner in his brain; not the smallest nook or cranny vacant for any fancies of the kind, even had it in a general way been disposed, which it was not, to admit such tenants. He could think of nothing but the old man: would he be as good as his word?

had he the power? was he not an impostor? Tom turned the subject over and over, examined it now in this light, and now in that light, as if he had been a Jew clothesman, inspecting the merits of an old coat. Still he could make nothing of it. But so quickly did the time pass under these amusing speculations, that long before he had any notion that the hour was up, the same light tapping was heard at his door, and the same musical voice informed him it had struck nine. Nine! had any one called? Not a soul, was the reply. No parcel—no message? Nothing of the kind. It was plain then; the old man was a cheat—a mountebank; he had been laughing at him all the time. The idea was enough to make a patient man furious; and Tom, not being a patient man, was very furious indeed. He jumped out of bed at a single bound, kicked his shoes one way and flung his clothes another, swore some dozen of his choicest oaths, and then bellowed to the voice at the door to take itself off, and not plague him any longer. His wrath, being in some measure relieved by this boiling over, continued to

simmer away more gently for the next ten minutes, during which he sate upon the bed and meditated. By that time it had so far cooled, that he was able to begin dressing ; and, finally, having wriggled himself into his fustian jacket, he descended—Tom slept in a loft—into the room of all-work, properly so called, for it equally served for kitchen, parlour, and drawing-room, besides upon occasion doing extra duty as a wash-house.

Though coarse and violent, and extremely fond of rule in his own person, Tom was not what is usually called an ill-tempered man—that is, not particularly ill-tempered. Let him have his own way in every thing, and his mood was, for the most part, placid enough. He had, besides, an exquisite appreciation of all that was most perfect in the sister arts of eating and drinking, the result possibly of early reminiscences, for his father, the corn-factor, had been a noted admirer of good-living. This angry mood, therefore, at once gave way to a well-pleased surprize when, upon entering the room below, he was greeted with the spectacle of a breakfast, such

as had never been seen in the house of Starlight since the paternal decease. For a moment, he was dumb from wonder. Tea, indeed, there generally was; sugar sometimes; bread and butter always, though in limited quantities, more particularly in regard to the latter; but now, not only were these usual articles supplied upon a most unusual scale, but the table besides presented some important novelties. Ale in a mighty flagon was a novelty; hot toast, in a pile equal to one of Grugeon's bread-mountains in the fairy tale, was a novelty; a splendid ham, the property of some Yorkshire boar deceased, was a novelty; a huge pie, which, like an Eastern mine, refused to reveal its hidden treasures till dug into, was a novelty; and these novelties, combined, would alone have been enough to persuade the most bilious subject into good-humour. But they were not alone. Presiding over them, like some beneficent fairy, was a bright-eyed, delicate young creature, who, although only Tom's sister, would have been much more in her proper place, had she been sitting at the breakfast-table in the Squire's man-

sion. How in so ungenial a climate she had ever shot up into the thing she was, can no more be explained than the sudden appearance of certain shrubs in ground where they have never been known for centuries. It belongs, indeed, to that class of wonders which men deny as long as they can, but which, when their existence cannot very well be disputed, are explained as being no wonders at all, but mere common events in the ordinary course of the world's doings. Not that Fanny had any of the acquired elegance of the drawing-room; so far from it, we must needs own, as faithful historians, that there was a certain degree of rusticity in her manners. In short, she was a beautiful wild-flower, fresh from the wood or meadow, with little cultivation beyond what had been given to her by the hand of nature; but then, as every one knows, that bountiful lady has some graces peculiar to herself and far beyond the reach of art, though it is seldom, and only to her especial favourites that she chooses to impart them.

What would not many a young fellow have given

just then, to have been in brother Tom's place, when this blue-eyed little fairy tripped up to him, and, affectionately kissing his forehead, wished him a happy New Year, in the same musical voice that had summoned him to rise?—for it was the same, as any one, who had once heard it, would have known directly. You could no more mistake it than you could the song of the nightingale. In my mind—and I dare be sworn I am not peculiar in this way of thinking—it would be worth any one's while to fall asleep twenty times a-day, upon condition of being wakened again by such music, and saluted, though it were only on the brow, with kisses from such a mouth, that really seemed as if it had never fed on any thing but roses. Why, even Tom—Tom, the poacher—Tom, the republican, felt her influence, and was subdued to a more gracious state of feeling than was at all usual with him in any other company.

Greatly did Fanny enjoy her brother's surprise at the appearance of the breakfast-table. Indeed, it was an over-earnest desire for this innocent gratifi-

cation, that had made her so anxious for his rising, and which led her, all other means having failed, to put the clock on half an hour, in hopes that its striking might induce him to get up. But now, when he demanded to know where so many dainties had come from, she could not help blushing, as well as laughing. And Master Thomas, being by this time in a mighty good humour, laughed too at her confusion. It told him at once that he had to thank Frank Meden for this, as well as for so many other acts of kindness—and often when the hand of want, or the hand of the law, was lying pretty heavy on him; for, of course, a man of Tom's liberal principles was peculiarly subject to such visitations. And who was Frank Meden? was he old, or young? Not old, most assuredly, or there would have been no occasion for Fanny's blushes. But not to keep my readers in unnecessary suspense, Frank was a fine young fellow, about six and twenty, or perhaps not quite so much, by profession a surgeon, and at that time domiciled with Doctor Jeremiah Squills, in the capacity of assistant; that is, he did all the

work appertaining to the Doctor's practice, or nearly all, in consideration of an annual stipend, so nicely calculated, as not to allow of his starving, nor yet of his committing the slightest excess of any kind, unless he could contrive to do so upon credit. This arrangement arose from Jeremiah's being afflicted with two maladies—the gout, and avarice. The one would not let him ride a score or so of miles daily, to visit his numerous patients, who dotted the surrounding landscape at such long intervals, as to make it hard work for a single horse to get round to them all ; the other made him put off, from week to week, and from month to month, a promise of two years' standing, that he would take Frank into a partnership of profit as well as labour. To himself the Doctor would excuse this want of punctuality by setting it down entirely to his regard for Frank, and by a most ingenious view of the matter, he stood acquitted to his own conscience of any thing like selfishness. " If," would he argue, " I give this young fellow the means of marrying, marry he will, to a certainty :—salts and senna could not save him.

And what says the old adage — ‘no man is thoroughly ruined till he is married.’ Upon my life I should not be happy again if I helped Frank to ruin himself.”

But although this mode of viewing the case was quite satisfactory to the Doctor, it was far from being the same to his assistant. Hence arose sundry miffs and tiffs between them, productive occasionally of strong hints from Frank of an intention to cut the Doctor’s acquaintance, and try his fortunes elsewhere. These, however, made very little impression on the sly, old fox, who knew well enough that Frank was not likely to leave the place so long as his mistress lived there. So he laughed in his sleeve, and let him talk on until he was tired.

Infinite was the glee wherewith Tom sat down to consume the dainties provided by his generous friend; nor did he allow his enjoyment to be in the least disturbed by any ill-timed reflections upon the inconveniences this liberality might perchance occasion to the giver of the feast. Such considerations would

have been altogether inconsistent with the maxims of patriotic philosophy.

With a hand so firm and rapid, that even Liston or Brodie, dexterous as they are, might have envied it, he made a first incision into the ham ; and then, having duly tested the quality of the foaming ale, pronounced Frank to be " one of the finest fellows breathing, and the only aristocrat he ever could away with." Now, although there was nothing very terrible to Fanny's own apprehension in the word, aristocrat, yet, as she well knew it was the hobgoblin that perpetually haunted her brother's fancy, she somewhat demurred to its being applied to Frank, even with this qualification. But the poacher sturdily refused all compromise of his opinion.

" Truth is truth," he replied, " and I can't help it. I wish I could ; I wish I was able to make cousin Frank think and act like a free-born Englishman, and one as knew the rights of the people, and would not flinch from upholding them."

" Heaven forbid !" said Fanny ; visions of Tom's

usual associates flashing upon her with the suddenness of lightning, and eliciting this exclamation, which she was sorry for the moment it was uttered.

“What’s that?” thundered the poacher; “what did you say, girl? would you have him a mean, grovelling, contemptible slave, a door-mat for rich tyrants to wipe their feet on?—Or perhaps you’d rather see him a tool in their hands?—a miserable tool—a mill-stone to be used for grinding down poor men, flesh and bones, and making them into bread for the oppressors?”

There was something that bewildered while it dazzled in these beautiful tropes and figures, the grinding of men into quarters and half quarters not seeming at first sight a much more feasible operation than that of manufacturing the staff of life, as some have professed to do, from saw-dust. Still the general scope of his harangue was perfectly intelligible; it was plain enough to be seen that the patriotic steam was getting up fast, and threatened an explosion; wherefore, to open a safety-valve before

mischievous happened, Fanny lost no time in denying the atrocities imputed to her.

"Oh no, no, no!" she exclaimed, hurrying the negatives one upon another with a speed that well nigh strangled them,—“no, dear Tom; nothing of the kind, I assure you.”

“Then what did you mean?” growled the poacher impatiently.

“I only meant it would be a pity for him to change, when he is so—so good already.”

Good was not the word that Fanny had intended; it was merely a substitute for something that might have seemed too eulogistic in the present state of affairs; yet even this qualified phrase was far from satisfying Tom, who retorted with much acrimony—

“Good! what’s the use of his goodness! who’s the better for his goodness?—hand me over the ale;—isn’t it the same as though he had none at all, so long as he only cares for rich folks?—put the pie this way.”

Fanny, for the life of her, could not help smiling at these practical comments on the inutility of

Frank's liberal qualities, and unluckily the smile was not so evanescent but that the orator caught a glimpse of it, and took fire accordingly.

"What the devil are you giggling at now?—always, grin, grin, grin, like a monkey at a fair. There's no use in talking sense to you—not a bit."

"Did I laugh?" said Fanny, with a look of the most innocent surprize.

"Yes, you did," replied the poacher gruffly.

"Well, I don't know—perhaps I did—and how can I help it, when my heart is so light, and every thing about me seems so cheerful? What a pleasant face the New Year has!—how merrily the bells are ringing!—and only look at the sparrow on the barn-eaves yonder; how the little fellow chirps and enjoys the sunshine. My dear Tom, it puzzles me to think how you can be cross with any thing or any body this morning."

And she leant upon his shoulder, looking into his face with such sweet, affectionate smiles as must have softened anything except the class, to which Tom belonged. But patriots are made of too hard

a metal for smiles to melt, even though they came from the lips of Venus, and it was with infinite contempt he replied,—“Ugh! that’s the way you always talk.”

“Well now, but own the truth, Tom; isn’t always laughing better than always crying?”

“I’m not so sure of that; there are some folks I should vastly like to see crying; and if they burst their hearts with it, t’would please me all the better.”

Fanny assumed the prettiest pout imaginable, and holding up her handkerchief to her eyes affected to be on the borders of a hearty cry,—a manoeuvre which somewhat discomposed the poacher; he felt much as a man might do, who, in playing with a favourite dog, has unawares handled it too roughly and made it yell.

“Why, what the plague is the matter with the fool now?” he exclaimed in tones, which though tolerably gruff were meant to be conciliatory.

At this demand a laughing bright eye peeped out at Tom from one corner of the handkerchief for a moment, and then vanished again.

"Well!" cried the poacher, in his surprise laying down his knife and fork, and suspending all farther attacks on the ham—"the man, as gets you, will have a nice article; he won't wish himself hanged a dozen times a day—not he, poor devil."

"Now don't be cross," replied Fanny; "I was only trying to look as you like to see people. But I can't manage it—I can't indeed, Tom—I can't help being happy."

At first Mr. Thomas felt as if his dignity had been compromised, and some especial damage thereby done to the rights of man, which it became him to vindicate by flying into a passion again, that being for about the fifth or sixth time since his rising. Luckily, ere his wrath could come to a head, it was diverted by the lifting up of the door-latch, and the unexpected appearance of Frank Meden, for it is the great advantage of a poor man's house—the only one as far as I can see—that the door does not need either bell or knocker; it waits upon itself, or at all events it turns readily on the hinge, and keeps no one else waiting.

The new-comer brought with him Lord Chesterfield's best letter of recommendation—that is to say, he was a handsome young fellow, with fine, open features, inspiring confidence at the first sight ; his head was what a painter would have admired, if considered by itself, though it was perhaps a little too large for his figure, which was slightly built, and under the middle height ; nor did it need any help from phrenology to discover he was shrewd and intelligent, with a strong propensity to the sarcastic ; but so happily was this disposition tempered by good humour and kindness of heart, that he was not the less a favourite with all classes. To be sure they stood somewhat in awe of his satiric mood, and there was a general desire to be as little silly as possible when he was present ; the old ladies were less tender in their attentions to cats and lap-dogs before dear Mr. Frank,—“ he was such a quiz ! ”—and the young ones would drop, as far as they could, any favourite affectation ; while the gentlemen, if they rode their hobby-horses at all in his company, did so in a quiet, jog-trot way, instead of their usual

mode of riding a steeple-chase on that imaginary steed. The only exceptions to this general feeling were Tom and his sister. The patriotism of the former was too sturdy to check at anything, and it might be too that for certain considerations Mr. Frank chose to be blind in his case, or at least to wink at what he could not help seeing. Then as to Fanny—the gay, single-minded, little Fanny—never was she so wholly and truly herself, never did she give such free way to every thought and feeling, as when her lover was by. The least fashionable damsel, that ever stepped out of a carriage in Bond Street, must have pitied the frank simplicity, with which she hurried forward to greet him, so full of pretty thanks and kind wishes for the New Year, that it was absolutely like telling the man she was over head and ears in love with him. For shame, Fanny! didn't you know that all such exhibitions of real feeling were vulgar in the extreme? couldn't you for once deny your better nature, and play the coquette as others do? To say the least, it showed a great want of good breeding, .

The usual preliminaries of a meeting, and more particularly of a New Year's meeting, having been gone through, the poacher pressed his friend to partake of some of the many good things he had himself so liberally provided. The ham in particular Tom recommended to his notice, but spoke rather slightly of the ale, a casual glance at the jug having shown him there was not much remaining. Frank, however, declined his hospitality, having, as he said, little time to spare, and something of importance to communicate.

"Out with it," replied Tom, recommencing his suspended breakfast operations; "I can listen to you, and go on with my feed at the same time."

"In the first place," began Frank, "old Squills has taken me into partnership; the deed was signed and sealed yesterday."

What made Fanny turn so pale?—and then colour?—and then—yes, it really was a tear, a single bright drop, that hung upon her long soft eyelashes, while her lips smiled, and murmured something very like, "Thank Heaven!" It was so softly breathed, though,

as to be quite lost in an ejaculation of another kind from brother Tom, whose equanimity seemed to be greatly disturbed by these tidings, and he could not help showing that it was so.

“ I don’t know how it is,” he cried, “ but you’re always in the luck of it—cursed hard for other folks. There never will be fair play in this squire-ridden, priest-ridden, infernal country ’till we have an out and out revolution.”

“ And cousin Tom has changed places with the Lord Chancellor, or the Archbishop of Canterbury,” replied Frank drily.

“ Aye, you may laugh—”

“ Many thanks to his Majesty, Tom, the first of that name, for his gracious permission. And now to business. I have a message for you from the squire, Sir Edward—now don’t set up your bristles in that way, like your own terrier about to do battle with a rat ; there’s nothing hostile in it, or, you may be sure, I shouldn’t have been the messenger. He wishes to be your friend if you’ll let him.”

“ I the friend of a tyrant ? of a villanous aristocrat, who got Bill Symonds transported when—”

“ When he ought to have been hanged ; I remember all about it, and quite agree with you. It was wrong of Sir Edward—very wrong indeed—not to let them hang the fellow.”

“ I meant nothing of the kind, and you know I didn't,” growled the poacher.

“ Didn't you ?” replied Frank coolly ; “ well, no matter ; perhaps you didn't.”

“ But the message ?” said Fanny, her knowledge of Tom's numerous transgressions against the game-laws, suggesting certain vague doubts of no pleasant nature, even with Frank for the messenger.

“ Only this, my love ; Jones, the squire's head game-keeper—”

“ Rot him !” muttered Tom

“ Growing too old for duty,” continued Frank without noticing the interruption, “ Sir Edward intends superannuating him on a decent pension, and has commissioned me to offer you the vacant situation.”

“ You don’t say so !” exclaimed the poacher, and without one of his usual oaths.

He might well be surprised. The truth is, that the proposal originated in no undue estimate of his moral qualifications for the office, but in the earnest solicitations of Frank, who having saved the life of Sir Edward’s only child when given over by a London physician, had thus obtained for the moment a degree of favour, which made it impossible to refuse him anything. At first, indeed, the kind-hearted knight internally wondered not a little at such a request, and heartily wished that his doctor had drawn upon his gratitude in some other shape. Still, as the bill had been regularly drawn and accepted, he deemed himself bound to honour it.

Great was the delight of Fanny, when her lover now produced a tin-case, and held it out to the poacher, as if in answer to his question.

“ There it is, Tom.”

“ There’s what ?”—said the intended brother-in-law, not choosing to understand, lest it should seem

he was in a hurry to snap at aristocratic favours:—

“ The gamekeeper’s warrant to be sure ; what else should it be ? ”

“ Oh !—the gamekeeper’s warrant, is it ? ”

A diplomatist of twenty years’ standing could not have better affected indifference to the object, he had most at heart. Frank, however, was much too sagacious to be taken in by it, and replied with equal coolness, “ Just so ; do you accept the offer ? ”

“ Why, as to that—head gamekeeper—the top of the tree, and no one over me—well, as of course it’s all your doing, and I haven’t got to thank the squire in the least for it, I rather think I will.”

Fanny clapt her hands in ecstasy.

“ I like everything in the business well enough, except calling him master, and *that’s* a word he won’t often hear from me. No, no ; they all know me too well to think I’d be a slave to any of them.”

“ A manly declaration, and just what I expected from you,” replied Frank in a tone that might have

deceived any one, who had not noticed the slight and almost imperceptible elevation of his eyebrows.—“ So, that’s settled. And now let me talk of myself—I have a favour to ask of you, Tom.”

This was a grand stroke of generalship. It invested Tom at once with all the dignities belonging and appertaining to one, who may either give or refuse, and it put him into good-humour accordingly.

“ What is it ?” he exclaimed, leaning back in his elbow-chair, and very much in the style of a magistrate, disposed to listen favourably to some culprit’s vindication—“ Out with it, man ; I dare be sworn, I shan’t say no.”

“ It’s only this ; if I can persuade Fanny to agree to our marriage taking place in four weeks from now, you won’t refuse your consent ?”

“ Fanny agree !—if I say, yes,—and I do say, yes,—I should like to hear of her not agreeing. There’s my hand upon it.”

Of course, after a declaration so decided from her brother, it would have been wrong in Fanny to have

objected. In a spirit, therefore, of obedience, that was highly becoming, she said nothing—only blushed, and held up a finger at Mr. Frank as if to intimate, “a pretty trick you have been playing, to take me by surprise in this way ; I am very angry with you, Sir—indeed I am.” But so little was the young gentleman touched by this silent rebuke, that in the vehemence of his transport he gave her a hearty kiss, no permission asked ; and Fanny, to show I suppose that she bore no malice, returned it, though so gently that a thistle-down could scarcely have fallen more lightly on his cheek. Slight, however, as it might be, it elevated him for the moment into Paradise ; and as those, who confer happiness upon others, deserve to be happy themselves, it is to be hoped the little maiden had her share of this imaginary Eden. I rather think she had.

So pleasantly did the time pass with these helps to its flight, that Frank quite forgot he was, or ought to be, in a vast hurry to see his patients. There was Mr. Tims, the dropsical publican, as uncomfortable as a man could be, for want of his customary tapping ;

Miss Margaret Gubbins, a maiden lady of fifty, was no less inconsolable till she had related, as usual, what a bad night she had passed, and how she was certain she was going fast,—as no doubt she was, and had been according to her own account for the last two years, but was still a long way off from the end of her journey ; then the five children of the Hobbs' had all been visited by some disease, that could not wait a minute, but what it was nobody could tell, the opinions of the old women in the neighbourhood being pretty equally divided between the respective claims of small-pox, measles, surfeit, and scarlatina ; still more important, the overseer had got a fierce attack from his old enemy the gout, the result of too many parochial dinners devoured for the benefit of the poor, who, ungrateful varlets as they were, and as he always said they were, instead of acknowledging his charitable exertions, detested him from the very bottom of their hearts ; then too the widow Pennyman had entered into a solemn league and covenant with herself, whereof she had given due notice, that not another phial or pill-box should cross her door-way

till one of the firm of Squills and Meden chose to pay her a visit, the said firm having neglected to do so for the last two days ; and numerous other patients—impatients rather in this case—had made up their minds to die, if not visited forthwith. And there ~~sate~~ sate the firm all the time, or at least the only efficient member of it, making love as quietly as if Death had promised to give the world a short respite in consideration of its being New Year's Day. It was abominable, and would have gone on much longer if the clock of the village-church had not called out in its clear, deep tones that it was *Nine*, an intimation which made Frank jump up from his chair, and suddenly recollect that there were other things to be attended to in life besides love-making.

“ Bless my soul, it's nine o'clock ! I had no idea it was so late.”

“ Nine !” echoed Tom, looking up at a wooden clock, that ticked asthmatically in the corner ; “ why, what the devil has come to the Dutchman ? its half-past by him.”

Before Fanny could explain that it was no fault of

the steady old Dutchman, who, to do him justice, was little given to such escapades as leaving Time half an hour behind him, in walked Mr. Gripe, the one-eyed village attorney, greatly to the surprize of all parties, and the discomfiture of the poacher. Upon more than one occasion Tom had come into contact with him, but as it is quite impossible even to shake hands with a lawyer, and not have good cause to remember it, their dealings had left behind no pleasant recollections; and he now eyed him much as a dog does the object which he longs to fly at, but is half afraid of. It might be to obviate these unfavourable prejudices in his regard, that the man of law doffed his hat almost before entering the room, and bowed round most obsequiously, beginning, however, and ending with Tom, at whom—to again use a canine illustration—he made a dead set, like an old pointer at his bird; the advanced finger of the biped would have been well symbolized by the uplifted forepaw of his rival quadruped.

“I hope I don’t intrude,” he said. “The fact is, I did tap two or three times, when, as no one

answered and I heard voices within, I made bold to enter."

That was a thing he often did without the preliminary of tapping, and when, if the inmates had been at all aware of the honour intended them, they would most assuredly have double-locked their doors. Even the unwonted blandness of his manner failed to set any one of the party at ease; Frank had a shrewd suspicion that the lawyer was indulging in the feline taste of playing with the mouse before pouncing upon it; Fanny was all in a tremble without well knowing why; and the poacher was employed in running over internally the bede-roll of his offences—a pretty long one—and calculating which of them it might be that had just then risen up in judgment against him. Mr. Gripe saw it was high time to avow his pacific intentions in the most explicit language.

"I fear," he began, "I fear that the object of my visit is mistaken; nothing unfriendly, I assure you, nothing upon my honour. But if you'll allow me, Mr. Starlight, I'll take the liberty of seating myself. The weather is not hot—far from it—but I have had

a long walk, and to tell the truth—we lawyers do tell the truth now and then—ha! ha! ha! I'm not quite so young as I was."

As Mr. Starlight uttered a low growl in answer to this appeal, which might possibly be intended for assent, the lawyer took advantage of it to sit down, and drew from his pocket a bundle of long-shaped documents neatly tied with red tape. These he proceeded to undo with much deliberation, but talking all the while for the better economy of his time.

"You had, I think, a maternal uncle, Mr. Starlight; indeed, I may venture to affirm I am certain of the fact, though *that* is a thing I am not fond of doing; it would hardly be prudent in men of our profession, Mr. Starlight. His name, as he often communicated it to me in letters, and as it appears in various documents requiring his signature, was Christopher Cobham."

"An old hunks!" said the poacher, with great indifference. "They made a nabob of him in India, or some such thing; and he rolled in money I have

heard ; but he never sent me the value of a nutmeg-grater—curse him.”

“ No ; don’t curse him, Mr. Starlight ! pray don’t ; he’s dead.”

“ Well, and what’s that to me ?”

“ I think I may venture to say it’s a great deal to you—I wish it had been as much to me. There are few, I believe, who would not be proud and happy to stand in your shoes, Mr. Starlight, though it were the worst pair you ever had on.”

“ What’s the old file driving at now ?” muttered Tom ; “ some deep dodge, I’ll be bound ; but if I can make out a word of it all, I’m a Dutchman,”

“ I dare say not,” replied the lawyer ; “ I dare say not, my young friend, if you will allow me the pleasure of calling you so. If every one could comprehend these things without help, where would be the use of lawyers ?”

“ Such being the case,” said Frank drily, “ had you not better enlighten our dullness upon this matter without delay, and show us practically that lawyers can be useful ?”

“Aye, to be sure ; why don’t he?” snarled the poacher, “and not keep one hung up in this way like a chap that has only been half-strangled. If you have anything against me, let’s have it at once.”

“Anything against you, Mr. Starlight ! bless my heart and soul, what can you be thinking of?”

“What am I thinking of?” said the poacher with a look of infinite disgust ; “may be I’m thinking that you have got John Doe and Richard Roe in your pocket, and are afraid to bring them out ; may be I’m thinking of the ‘Sizes, and how you tried to send me off to Botany Bay for killing a hare by moonlight ; may be I’m thinking which is the shortest way to show you out of the house, if you don’t tell us plainly what you came for—any how, it’s nothing to your advantage that I am thinking of.”

At this hint Mr. Gripe without another word raised his glass to his one eye, and bending over the parchment began to read aloud certain cabalistic preliminaries for the general edification. The moment Tom became aware of his purpose, he put a stop to it with his usual promptitude.

"Holloa!" he exclaimed, "what the devil are you about there? none of that gibberish, if you please; but let us have the upshot of the matter, short and plain, so that a fellow may understand it."

"Dear me! dear me! this is a very unbusiness-like way of doing business; quite out of the regular way of practice—quite, I assure you. But if such is your wish—"

"Don't I tell you it is?"

"I think I may venture to affirm you do—ha! ha! ha! no great danger in that."

"But there will be to your head," shouted the poacher, "and that in a brace of shakes, if you don't let us know what all this means without more nonsense."

"My dear Sir!" cried the terrified lawyer, "pray don't be so hasty; only consider how—"

"I give you fair warning—One!"

Mr. Gripe held out both hands defensively to ward off the threatened missile, calling out piteously to the lovers, "Mr. Frank! Miss Fanny!" but when the latter, all fear and trembling, would have inter-

posed, Frank whispered something in her ear, which seemed to satisfy her of the propriety of the non-intervention code between two belligerents ; and the poacher with increasing energy, thundered out, " Two ! "

" The heir to Taunton Hall—you are the heir to Taunton Hall ! " screamed the lawyer, driven out of all his usual phrases by the manifest urgency of the danger.

At this intimation the jug dropped from Tom's hand, and for a time even a child might have knocked down the strong man with a willow-rod. It was strange, and almost frightful, to see the convulsive twitchings and workings of those hard features, the dilation of the nostrils, the compression of the lips, and the anxious heaving of the chest ; nor was it easy to find out what was really the master-passion of the moment amidst these fierce struggles. Soon, however, something blacker and more potent than the rest bubbled up from this devil's-cauldron, and with a look of triumph, such as we may suppose Lucifer to have put on when Eve first tasted of the forbidden

apple, he flung the case with the gamekeeper's certificate into the fire. Frank shook his head, and Fanny, who had been all smiles of joy before, caught the expression of his face, and in an instant reflected its feelings upon her own, although unconscious of any cause of doubt except that he seemed doubtful. As for Mr. Gripe, not being at all re-assured by this action, which he took rather as a *refresher*, though not of so pleasant a kind as those he was in the habit of dealing out to counsel, he delayed no more with his explanation.

“ A beautiful estate, Mr. Starlight—a splendid estate !—worth three thousand per annum, more or less. When your uncle returned from India about two months since—I think I may venture to say two months—”

“ Two months !” interrupted Frank ; “ and pray, Mr. Gripe, how happened it that you never let us know of his return ? I believe we are all, to use your own phrase, more or less related to him.”

“ Pardon me, my good sir ; I had no such instructions ; quite the reverse ; my respected client, from some motives that he did not care to divulge even to

me, chose to have his return kept secret. Poor gentleman ! he had set his heart upon possessing Taunton Hall, and then to die just as I had completed the purchase !—it must have been a sad disappointment to him.”

“ When did he die ? ” abruptly demanded the poacher.

“ I assure you, Mr. Starlight, that I have lost no time in—”

But Tom’s impatience, which had long been at the boiling-point, now fairly boiled over ; and before any one could interfere to prevent him, even had they wished it, he planted his fingers in the lawyer’s neck-cloth, pulling at it with so much vehemence as well nigh to strangle that interesting gentleman.

“ When did he die, rascal ? ”

“ At twelve—o’clock—last night,” gasped the unhappy victim of circumlocution.

“ Twelve o’clock ! ” said Tom, slowly, and as it seemed unconsciously, relaxing his hold of him.

“ Twelve o’clock ! ” repeated a low solemn voice from without.

Every eye was instantly directed to the window,

whence the sound had come; and every one at the same moment, though with very different feelings, became aware of the Old Man's presence. After peering round earnestly at the group within, he raised his finger to Tom as if in warning, and then swiftly and silently glided off in a very spectral fashion, except that ghosts don't usually walk in the sunlight; their taste, like that of lovers, being altogether for moonshine. Before any of them could recover from the surprise of his appearance, he was lost to sight in the wood, that on one side grew up to within a few yards of the cottage, affording him as convenient an escape as if there had been a stage-trap for his accommodation.

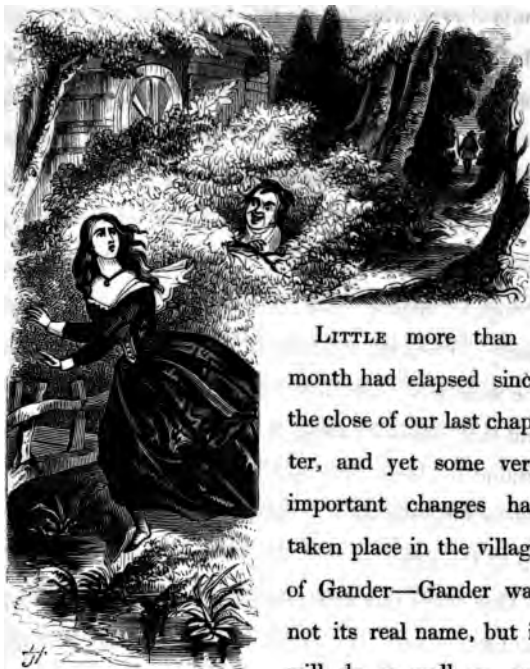
"Well!" exclaimed Frank; "that same gentleman, whoever he is, belongs to the free and easy club."

"He must surely be mad, or silly, to play such tricks," said Fanny.

"Only eccentric, my love," replied the Doctor. "He had taken the slight liberty of listening to all that was said here, and would now amuse himself with passing for a Doctor Faustus. Plaguy cool, however."

The lawyer for once was silent. So was Tom. His first impulse had been to follow the old man, and he had even whistled up the dogs to set them on his track ; but the idea was abandoned almost as soon as formed, and muttering half aloud : “ No ; why should I ? ” he flung himself into the nearest chair, like one who was thoroughly exhausted.

THE METAMORPHOSIS.



LITTLE more than a month had elapsed since the close of our last chapter, and yet some very important changes had taken place in the village of Gander—Gander was not its real name, but it will do as well as any

other to localize these records and at the same time preserve a convenient mystery. Events had been going on at a rail-road pace in the affairs of Thomas Starlight, Esq. of Taunton Hall; the grub

had sprung up into a butterfly, or rather into a flying dragon, if that interesting species of poetical zoology could ever be supposed to emanate from a crysalis. Mr. Thomas was no more like Tom, the poacher, than Sunday with its fine clothes, and bells clanging from pure idleness, is like any one of its rugged, hard-working brethren of the week, who hear no bells but what call them to labour, or perhaps to a hurried meal between whiles. Not that his nature was changed ; nature does not change so soon or so easily ; it was the same mind, just as much as it was the same face, only seen under other circumstances, and that makes a vast deal of difference ; we need but remind the ladies of a shot silk, and how it takes its colour from the way in which it happens to be held up to the light.

One of his first measures had been to cut the Black Lions to a man : the reader will no doubt call to mind the village club assembled under that sign. They were obviously unfitted for the parlour of Taunton Hall—vulgar rascals with horny hands and unwashed faces—fellows that were always grumbling at their betters ; and, what was worse than all, they could not

or would not, forget their old companion. Scouted, therefore, they were by him to a man, the barber alone excepted; and he too had undergone a transformation, in his case the most convenient that could have happened; no sooner had his crony mounted up, as we have already said, into a dragon, than, reversing the process, from having been a butterfly he sank back again into a caterpillar, in which shape he crept and crawled in the dust before the new-made squire, so as to secure to himself a large portion of his benevolence;—as large that is as the worthy gentleman had to bestow upon any one. He held the appointment of barber in ordinary to Mr. Thomas, it being tacitly understood between them that this included not only the duty of shaving and hair-cutting, but also the more important functions of listening to and spying out all that was said, done, or thought in the village, and retailing the same to his patron in his daily visitations.

But Mr. Thomas—we must not call him Tom any longer—had not only found out the unfitness of his quondam friends for Taunton Hall, but had also made some other discoveries from his present elevated

position, which he never would have done so long as he stood on the low grounds of life, the top of a hill being notoriously the best place for a wide prospect. Thus he had learnt, without help from any one, that there were other rights besides the rights of man ; territorial rights, for instance ; the right of killing his own game, and of transporting any ragged rascal who presumed to want a share in the amusement ; the right of pounding stray bipeds, who wandered without a home, as well as stray quadrupeds, a pair of legs more or less being the only essential difference between them ; and many things of the like kind he had discovered, all with such an easy spirit of intuition that he, at last, persuaded himself he had never thought otherwise.

With these new lights to guide him, Mr. Thomas began his career with the energy proper to so active and determined a character. He declared war to the knife against vagrants of every description, got the pauper allowance of food reduced one-half, and the pauper allowance of work augmented in the same proportion, shot a poacher with his own hand, and was the general dread of all misdoers. No wonder

then that he had closed up the short cut through Taunton Hall Park, just as Lord Mowbray had done ; and set up a notice against all trespassers, just as Lord Mowbray had done. Nay, he had even gone beyond his predecessor ; the old board was not large enough, nor strong enough in its threats for him, so he had replaced it by one of twice the size, and more than twice the bitterness.

These, and sundry other, new readings of old texts had brought the radicals to set down Thomas Starlight, Esquire, amongst their worst enemies, and they hated him the more for being a renegade. Even the blacksmith, who had been the most devoted of his followers, and who in his undoubting faith had for a long time literally fought his old crony's battles, giving and receiving many a hard blow to defend him from the charge of having ratted—even he at last was obliged to acknowledge his backsliding. What was the use of denying it ?—honest Tom, Tom the poacher, Tom the radical, was as truly dead as if he had been lying in the churchyard with Heaven knows how many tons of earth atop of him. Sometimes too when any fresh enormity of the squire's was

brought to light at the club, the blacksmith would shake his head, as if doubting whether there ever had been such a personage—whether in truth he was not altogether a pleasant fiction of the imagination.

In the meanwhile the object of these angry speculations was far from being on a bed of roses ; or, if Fortune had stuffed his pillow with that very agreeable aromatic, she had forgotten to pick out all the thorns. To his great surprise, he found that wealth was not uniformly a passport into that society, which he now so much coveted. Some indeed there were, who, from a general indifference to such matters were contented to consider the rent-roll of a good estate as a very sufficient substitute for any roll or scroll from the herald's college ; others again,—and these were chiefly fathers and mothers with a large provision of unmarried daughters—were ready enough to receive his visits ; but still there were many doors that were either entirely closed, or only half open to him. Now, as what we can't get is always of ten times more value to us than what we have, he looked upon all his newly-acquired prosperity as nothing in the scale

against this one ungratified wish, and might have relapsed into patriotism out of sheer disappointment, if just then the member for the county had not happened to die. This of course was an event that supplied oil to every lock, bolt, and bar in the county ; not a door but opened readily enough now. It is time however to see what is passing at Taunton Hall.

Mr. Thomas was sitting before the fire in his dressing-room, enjoying the *dolce far niente*, to all appearance with as keen a relish as any lazzarone could show when basking in the full blaze of a Neapolitan sun. If there was not much grace, there was plenty of ease in his attitude ; one leg reclined negligently over the elbow of his arm-chair, the other rested comfortably enough on a velvet cushion, and in his left hand, that hung listlessly at his side, was a half-read newspaper, while the right was leisurely employed in probing his teeth with a silver tooth-pick. A gentle tap was heard at the door ; but not until it had been repeated some five or six times, and at last with a timid increase of sound as if the person

knocking wavered between the fear of offence and the doubt of not having been loud enough, did the owner of Taunton Hall vouchsafe to call, "come in, and don't stand hammering there all day." At this gracious permission, the barber made his appearance, carrying a silver basin, with the ready napkin on his arm, and bowing at every second or third step with oriental humility, when Mr. Starlight, who now held punctuality to himself a cardinal virtue, and the want of it among the seven deadly sins, immediately cast his eyes up to the mantle-piece to inquire of the clock there how matters stood. The clock in reply pointed out with his long finger that the barber was full five minutes behind time.

"What the deuce is the meaning of this, Higgins?" exclaimed the squire, abandoning his easy attitude for one of greater dignity—"am I to be kept here all day waiting for you?"

"Beg your Honour's pardon," stammered the delinquent, "but if you please, it an't the half hour yet by the church-clock."

“ And what do I care for that ? I go by my own clock ; and so must you, if you want my custom.”

“ Very sorry, your Honour—will take care it don’t happen again.”

The barber had somehow or another got it into his head that it wasn’t civil to a superior—he didn’t care about other folks—to use the first person, and hence this little peculiarity in his replies. Squire Starlight condescended to be somewhat mollified, only bidding him with a curse to get ready his shaving tackle ; and while the barber proceeded with much apparent alacrity to strop his razor, and work the soap into a lather, he began as usual to inquire into the news of the village.

“ What news up town to-day, Simon ? what do they say of me now, for I know the curs will be talking of their betters ? There’s a fine howl I suppose, about that poaching scoundrel, Smith, I shot at the other night.”

“ Why, they do grumble a little, your Honour, since the doctor was forced to impute his leg.”

“ Oh they do, do they ? well, let them take care it isn't too loud, or I may *imputate*, as you call it, some of their ears for them. What else ?—anything about this new election ?”

“ The talk is 'twill be a hard run between Lord Mil-dew and t'other chap.”

“ Aye, indeed !—votes then must be worth something just now ?”

“ Worth, your Honour !” cried the barber in a sudden fit of enthusiasm ; “ they never fetched such a price before—leastwise, not in my recollection.”

The squire whistled, and looked steadily at him for several seconds, whereat Simon in some alarm suddenly stopped short in the midst of his operations upon the lather.

“ And whom have you sold yours to ?”

“ Hope your Honour doesn't think would go for to do sich a thing without knowing your Honour's mind first !”

“ Oh, you mean I am to have the refusal,” said the Squire drily ; “ what's your price ?”

"Price, your Honour!—wouldn't sell for no price," replied Simon sturdily.

Again Mr. Starlight took to whistling, and fixed a long, steady gaze on this independent voter.

"You wouldn't?"

"Not for no price; means to vote according to my conscience; and, as a poor chap like me doesn't know which is the best man, hopes your Honour will advise me."

"All right," said the Squire with an approving nod; "you're an honest fellow, Simon, and shan't want for my advice when the time comes; there's my—"

He was about to say "hand," and offer it too, but recollected himself in good time—

"I mean, you have my word for it."

"Thank your Honour," replied the barber cheerfully, as if the greatest favour in the world had been conferred upon him; and, too wily to follow up the subject any farther, he commenced operations upon the Squire's chin in silence.

It was destined to be a busy morning. Scarcely was the shaving over, when a servant announced that Sir Edward and Lord Mildew were waiting below, and begged the favour of an interview. Most pleasantly did the announcement sound upon the ear of Mr. Thomas ; but with an instinctive tact that made ample amends for the want of previous habits, he assumed an air of indifference as if Lords and Knights of the shire had been his every-day acquaintance, and desired the man to say that he would see them the moment he was disengaged. Nor did he at all inconvenience himself by any unusual hurry in his movements ; on the contrary, he allowed them ample space to discuss the merit of his pictures and vases, if they were so minded, before he found his way to the library, and ordered the man to show them in to him. The interval, however, had been more pleasantly spent by his electioneering guests than in studying either marble or canvass. By some mistake they had been shown into the room where Fanny was sitting, the work, that should have employed her hands, lying unheeded in her lap, while,

as any one might detect, her thoughts were absent on matters of deeper interest. Upon their entrance she courtesied and would have left the room ; but the old Lord, who seemed mightily struck by her appearance, pressed her with such earnestness to stay, that in her ignorance of life she was unable to refuse, however gladly she would have done so.

Some grave folks,—perhaps their gravity was their greatest claim to wisdom—have derided the notion of love at first sight. It is a very true notion notwithstanding, and no doubt the best excuse for love, as for murder, is its being unpremeditated. If so, Lord Mildew had a sufficient plea in mitigation of any judgment to be pronounced against him. He had been enamoured some scores of times—it was the principal occupation of his life—but never so truly or so desperately as just now at the first glimpse of Fanny. If he had seen as handsome faces before—and he had—nay, handsomer—still they never made the same impression on him. And he also had made an impression on Fanny, only it happened to be a disagreeable one ; to the best of her recollection

she had never met with a face half so ugly or repulsive, and, the more polite and attentive he grew, the more she became convinced of the fact. After the first ten minutes she regarded him with an intensity of dislike most unusual to her gentle nature, though in this there was nothing to surprize any one who knew him. There is an instinct in the uncorrupted mind of woman that warns her of peril as surely as the sea-bird presages foul weather long before it really comes. She had even made a faint resolution of leaving the room, when greatly to her relief the servant returned to announce that Mr, Starlight was disengaged.

“It’s fortunate that we are called away,” whispered Sir Edward laughingly to his companion as the door closed behind them; “in another minute you would have proposed to this young creature; but I doubt it would have been of little use; she’s pledged, heart and hand to a friend of mine, honest Frank Meden; and, by my faith, here he comes, to make good the old proverb. Ah, Frank, how are you? My Lord, allow me to introduce to your notice Mr.

Francis Meden, the neatest of hands with a scalpel, and no bad one with a carving knife ; he's the *Æsculapius* of these parts ; Liston wanted to have him to London, and Bright owned he could not mend his practice."

The usual salutations being gone through in an abbreviated form, for this introduction took place in the passage, his Lordship began to climb the stairs by the help of the banisters, followed by his companion, while Frank made his way to the room, where from previous experience he knew he should find Fanny. Strange to say, he did not go in at once as he used to do, but lingered at the door—kept his fingers on the lock-handle without moving it, and when at last he did fairly turn it round, still hesitated to fling the door open. What could be the matter ? had they quarrelled ? Little fear of that, as any one would have said, who had seen their meeting, and how their eyes glistened, and the dark cloud passed away that had saddened the brow of either only a moment before. Still there was something wrong somewhere, for in a few minutes Frank again looked

full of thought, and evidently of no pleasant nature.

“ Fanny, my dear, I am determined—”

He hesitated. Whatever his determination might be, it seemed like Macbeth’s *amen* to stick sadly in his throat.

“ Fanny, love, my mind’s made up. I’ll bring your brother to book this very day.”

“ Oh, no, no, no !” said Fanny eagerly ; “ not to-day : he’s in such a humour.”

“ This very hour. And can’t you see with those bright eyes of yours he gets worse instead of better, and if he won’t keep his word to-day he will be still less inclined to do so to-morrow ? Depend upon it, should any one with a title step in and offer himself, he’d find out I wasn’t good enough to be his brother-in-law.”

“ Well, but my dear Frank,” said the simple-hearted girl, “ there’s no fear of that. What nobleman would think of wanting to marry me ?”

“ Any nobleman with eyes in his head, and I have seldom heard of their being without them where beauty

was concerned. There's that Lord Mildew for instance, who has just left you ; why shouldn't he be the man?"

" Are you in earnest, Frank ?"

" To be sure I am."

Fanny only recollected his Lordship's gout and wrinkles, and at the idea of his falling in love burst into so pleasant and light-hearted a laugh, that Frank caught the infection, the angry spot—it had never been a large one—passing from his brow. They were both as merry as needs be, when their mirth was abruptly terminated by the appearance of Mr. Thomas. And a very unpromising appearance it seemed for their affairs. Something in the recent interview had frosted him all over, and made him look cold and repulsive as a winter landscape, hung all about with ice-drops. The comparison held good in another point of view. He was not only chilling as the winter scene, but a feeling of gratified pride had lighted up his icicles, making him quite radiant with self-satisfaction. This change in the outward man was yet farther confirmed by his altered mode of salutation.

“Good morning to you, Mr. Francis,”—Frank would have been too familiar from a man, who had just shaken hands with Lord Mildew, and saw besides some gay prospects in the distance—“good morning to you, Mr. Francis. They told me you were waiting, but I had business with my Lord Mildew.”

And with a dignified condescension, in keeping with this address, he extended two fingers towards Mr. Francis, who, first eyeing them as if they had been some curious object submitted to his inspection, returned the compliment with a single finger. The thermometer, metaphorically speaking, of Mr. Starlight’s countenance, which was before at zero, now sank many degrees below it, as surely betokening the advent of a storm as a more gradual fall of the actual instrument under any hot climate would have done. Poor Fanny trembled at these ominous signs—she had learned to tremble of late—while the doctor felt a strong inclination to break out into open war : but just then a little terrier, which had been a favourite with Thomas in his poaching days, bounded in at the

open Frenchwindow. By what trifles are our ideas linked together! the sound of a bell, the fall of a leaf, the budding of a flower, or any one of the thousand straws which lie across the path of life, is sufficient to recall times and places that had faded, as it seemed, for ever from the memory. And so it now was with Frank. No sooner did the dog show himself, than in a moment Tom became to his fancy the old Tom—Tom, the poacher—Tom, who loved the moonlight far better than the day—Tom, who never went abroad without the terrier at his heels; and to see such a personage playing the great man in Taunton Hall! it was absolutely ridiculous. Even the joyous bark of Vixen, as she jumped up on the doctor, sounded like a merry laugh at the absurdity—"Bow, wow, wow." Oh yes, decidedly the little terrier enjoyed the joke, and was telling him that she did too.

"Down, Vixen, down," cried the doctor good-humouredly. "Poor brute! your fine kennel has not changed *you*, however."

Frank could not help it; the words bolted out in spite of him; he had no more to do with them than

an organ has with the psalm that is being played upon it. The speech, nevertheless, was unlucky in more senses than one, for it cost Vixen a kick in the ribs, that sent her off howling. Mr. Starlight then turned to his visitor,

“The servant said you wished to speak with me, Mr. Meden.”

“No, not with you,” replied Frank; “with an old friend of mine, one Thomas Starlight; and if the Squire of Taunton Hall would stand aside for a few minutes, and let me see him, I should take it as a favour. Come, come, Thomas,” he added in a more friendly tone, “lay aside all this nonsense, and let us be as we used to be.”

“I dare say!” returned the Squire doggedly; “*that* would suit you well enough, but how would it suit me?—not quite so well, I’m thinking.”

“Have I done anything to make you think worse of me than you did six weeks ago?”

“I’m not bound to answer all your questions, am I?”

“Suppose it so; I ask it as a favour.”

“And suppose I’m not in the mood to grant favours ; how then ?”

“Then !” said Frank reddening, “I might be apt to demand a right.”

“A right ?” echoed the Squire.

“A right,” retorted Frank. “By your own consent I was to marry your sister within the month ; it is now a fortnight beyond the time, and, if you want to be thought a gentleman, you must act as such. I call upon you to redeem your pledge ; either fix a time for our union, or show some good cause for the delay.”

“That’s it, is it ?”

“It is.”

“Well bullied ; but it won’t do with a man like me—it won’t do, I tell you.”

“What am I to understand by this, Mr. Starlight ?” said Frank with a strong effort to subdue his temper. “Speak out plainly, if you please,—what am I to understand by this ?”

“When I’m at leisure, if you ask as you ought to do, perhaps I may tell you. Just now, I’m not at

leisure, so the sooner you're on the move the better."

At this unceremonious notice to quit, which had all of the law's stringency without any of its forms it would have been not very surprizing if Frank had flown out into a violent rage, especially if we consider the heating process that had been going on in his brain for the last quarter of an hour; but the pale face and tearful eyes of Fanny seemed to say, "I have no one in the world to rely upon except yourself; do pray subdue your anger for my sake."—And he did subdue it, though it cost him no slight effort, and spoke with a wonderful degree of calmness.

"Enough said, Thomas—Mr. Starlight, I mean, but *I* can't shake off old habits so easily—enough said; if we agree in nothing else, we are quite of one mind as to its being high time for us to part, and meet hereafter as little as may be. Fanny, my love, of course all this makes no difference in our relation to each other. Keep up your spirits."

Thus saying, he kissed her with as little ceremony as if the parson had just pronounced a blessing, and

then strode off leaving the Squire quite paralyzed at such undisguised contempt of his authority. Fanny was in an agony of dread lest her brother should follow and commit some act of violence ; he had been known before then to break a man's head upon half the provocation ; but her terror reached its climax, when, after muttering to himself for several minutes, he suddenly burst out with,—“ and I'll do it too.”

What would he do ?

See him jump out of the window, snap off a tough branch from the nearest ash, and hurry by a short cut to the lodge-gate, and you will no longer doubt his purpose. Luckily for the preservation of the Queen's peace, Frank, whose horse was waiting for him, had mounted at once and galloped off to his patients, having no suspicion of the favour intended him ; the Squire, therefore, was compelled to postpone the gratification of his vengeance till another opportunity.

“ It's no matter,” he said to himself, breaking however the ash-slip to pieces, and flinging the fragments right and left in his disappointment ; “ what's

delayed is not paid, and so—as I’ve nothing else on hand, I’ll go and have a talk with Stella.”

The place to which he was bound, in consequence of this new fancy, was a snug whitewashed building, about half way up a low hill, in the midst of a mingled kitchen and flower-garden, flanked on one side by a sort of paddock or orchard, for the trees being few and scattered it might be doubtful to which name it had best the title. There was an air of quiet comfort about it externally, which was not at all belied by the interior, though the rooms were low and small, the chimnies out of all proportion high and wide, and the furniture of a somewhat humble fashion. Certainly it was not what Porson calls “a cottage of gentility,” but in many respects it was far superior to the general run of such tenements. As the parlour-window was open, though a comfortable wood-fire blazed upon the hearth, it was easy enough to see and hear all that passed within ; and in truth there was what might have made any one inquisitive without exactly being a “Peeping Tom of Coventry.” In an easy chair by the chimney-corner sat

an old man of at least eighty, his silver locks hanging about a face so calm, so expressive of every kindly feeling that it was quite a pleasure to look at him. Nor was it till after a time that you found out those mild blue eyes were sightless, and then you loved him all the more for his patient bearing under such an affliction, though indeed the word, *patient*, but faintly describes his look and manner; there was enjoyment—a full yet placid enjoyment—of life in every feature; the breeze from without was a pleasure to him; the light and warmth of the fire were a pleasure to him; and greater delight than all the rest was the voice of the maiden who sate opposite, and carolled a lively air while she plied her needle. It was his grand-daughter, and yet as little resembling him in mind and features as she did in years. But Nature, if we may believe her historians, delights at times in sending forth such anomalies, so that a modest family of primroses is often surprized at the appearance of a gawdy double-headed stranger amongst them, and the legitimate descendant of some yellow flower may turn out a bright scarlet.

Estella, or Stella as she was generally called to save time and breath, was a tall damsel not quite seventeen years old, of a dark complexion with full black eyes, and a face boding little self-control, though it was handsome, and possessed a strange sort of fascination that belonged more to its expression than to any particular regularity of features. She was evidently, if physiognomy be anything better than a dream, one of those natures, which may be so bad, or so good !—a straw will turn the balance either way. To a mind thus constituted, there could hardly be a greater misfortune than the loss of her mother while she was yet an infant, and this blow was followed, before she had reached fifteen, by the death of her father, whose half-pay died with him. As a natural result, the young orphan fell to the care of her maternal grandfather, the blind old Elias Fairfield, who had been head-master of the Free Grammar-School at Gander for fifty years, till the loss of sight compelled him to retire, followed by the good wishes of all his scholars past and present ; and they were not a few ; for, in addition to the boys upon

the foundation, such was his fame that many of the gentlemen's sons in the county had been entrusted to his superintendence. With all this he was a poor man. Ill-natured folks—but they were not many in his case—said it was the fault of his head; others pitied him for having too soft a heart; while the numbers, who had been benefited by his exuberant charity, could see nothing for blame or pity either—I should think not indeed!—they, who talked of such things, had only to look at that dear, kind old face, and be ashamed of themselves.

It would have been well for Stella's happiness had she fallen to the care of her grandfather at an earlier period, when her young mind was more wax-like and more open to receive impressions. Even as it was, he had got rid of some weeds, and brought forward some flowers, that belonged to her nature or previous education, for his mild and simple habits were eminently calculated to win over a temper, fiery indeed and wayward, but peculiarly susceptible of kindness. With what delight he seemed to listen to her song!—nay, it was hard to believe he did not see, so

earnestly and fondly were his eyes fixed upon her. Suddenly, however, the smile on the pale face was exchanged for a look of extreme anxiety ; his quick ear, quicker from the loss of sight, had caught a false tone—not musically false, but betraying some inward feeling in little harmony with her apparent cheerfulness. At this critical moment, when the question was on his lips, which, if spoken, might perhaps have averted no common calamity, he was interrupted by a chorus of boyish voices, so close and so unexpected as almost to startle him.

“Te, magister, salutamus,
Te, magister, nunc laudamus ;
Semper, semper sis beatus,
Felix dies quo tu natus.”

Hurrah !

“Why, it’s the boys from the free-school,” exclaimed the old man ; “I did not know it was a holiday.”

No, dear Elias—nor was it a holiday, according to the school-rubric ; but it is good sometimes to be

merry even though it is not so set down in the calendar ; and this was your birth-day—the first since blindness had compelled you to give up the ferula, which you had wielded so gently over the urchins, and in many instances over their fathers and even grand-fathers before them. Here they were, grateful little fellows, with full hands, and fuller hearts, come to say, ‘ we do love you so, kind old master ! ’ ” And, to use a common phrase, though not in a common sense, there was no love lost between them, for Elias could scarcely have taken a livelier interest in their welfare had they really been his own children.

In they tumbled, thronging, talking, laughing, till as many had crowded into the cottage-parlour as it would well hold, when the younger and weaker fry, who were thus ousted by their seniors, clambered up to the window-sill, where they clustered like a swarm of bees. The new schoolmaster, quite astounded at such a jubilee, would fain have re-established order among them.—Order ? silly fellow ! what are you thinking of ? is order better than those merry faces, all hope and sunshine ? is order better than all that

mass of happiness, which laughs, and shouts, and climbs, and hustles, and is not to be purchased at any price? leave them alone for goodness' sake. And he did leave them alone, for he was not a bad fellow, that new master, though he was far from being an Elias Fairfield. Somehow too he was beginning to laugh, and be exceedingly merry himself, without exactly knowing why—perhaps it was for company's sake.

But the head-boy had a grand Latin speech to deliver, a thing of his own concoction, and made expressly for the occasion. Of course he was in a hurry to begin—most orators are—and his influence, assisted by a hint from Stella that the noise was almost too much for her grandfather, effected a temporary lull. A proud moment was it for the young Cicero, and with infinite complacency did the sightless old man listen to his harangue, only throwing in an occasional correction—he could not entirely forget former habits—when the orator blundered in his grammar, as would now and then happen.

Then came the presentation of gifts, in which

each young holiday-maker acted for himself, and in a few minutes the cottage table was covered with nosegays, for as early as the season was—primroses, crocuses, both yellow and purple, polyanthus, pansies, and I know not what beside. One little fellow, having nothing better within his means, had tied together a bunch of daisies, which he presented amidst the jeers of his schoolmates — “a pretty gift for any one! on a birth-day too!” and again the laugh went round. But the old man caught the child to his bosom, and kissing him tenderly, while the tears ran down his furrowed cheeks, bade Stella take especial care of the daisies.

“Put them in water directly, love, and don’t fling them away, either, when they die—mind *that*. You can lay them between the leaves of my great bible, and then I shall always have them near me.”

What next? the orator again steps forward. No more Latin speeches, I hope—oh no! not the least fear of that. He is supported, as they say of other deputations, by a dozen of the eldest boys,

who for the last two months have clubbed together their weekly allowance to buy a silver goblet for their dear old master. It was second-hand, but just as good as new; the dents and bruises had been carefully hammered out, and it had been polished up both inside and outside, as only a silversmith can do these things. Indeed, their own funds had not sufficed for so magnificent an undertaking, and so they had been helped out by fathers, or brothers, or uncles, who in their day had been scholars of Elias, and now were grown up into substantial yeomen, or thriving shopkeepers.

What next?—a deputation of young girls from the neighbouring villages with fowls and eggs, and bacon. Why, surely, they must fancy the cottage in a state of siege, and badly off for provisions!

What next?—Sir Edward's gamekeeper with a hare, and his kind remembrance to his old master—will call himself before the day's over.

What next?—the widow Hill's stout coachman, and stout he had need be to carry that hamper on his shoulders; it was only by sidling, and giving it a

dexterous twist, that he got it in at the door at all. His face was red to a degree with the exertion ; and a merry face it was, in spite of his black clothes—new ones too—the gloss was scarcely off them. Setting down his hamper with more haste than regard to his neighbour's toes, he placed a letter in the old man's hand.

“Read it to me, my love,” said Elias, holding it out for his grand-daughter to take.

Stella glanced her eye over it, and then said, hastily,

“Mrs. Hill sends her compliments, grandfather, and wishes you many a happy birth-day.”

It was well for Elias he could not read that note, blotted as it was with tears—recollections of the widow's son, who had left the free-school not two years before, so full of promise ! so like what his father had been ! And now he was taken from her—he, the only one ! her last hope on this side the grave ! No, no, Stella ; on no account read what is written there ; it would turn the cheerful birth-day into a day of mourning. As it is, the old man

sighs heavily at the name, and a thought, it may be, crosses his mind, how sad it is that the young should die, leaving age to grieve for them. But it was only for the moment, and those, who were nearest to him, might hear his trembling lips murmur, "Thy will be done!"

More visitors!—more!—more yet! Some by deputy, some in person; but all bringing with them kind gifts, and kinder words. How the cottage holds them all I cannot tell, though half the boys have made their exit by the window, *that* being a much more attractive mode of going out than by the door.

But what is Master Tibbs about?—that squinting, sallow-faced lad, the black sheep of the flock—for most flocks have their black sheep. Instead of being with his school-mates, the rascal is setting on a mongrel cur, as lean and mischievous as himself, to worry the old man's pet cat. Out flew Stella, and, indignant at the sight of pussy's torn ear and bleeding throat, gave Master Tibbs so sound a box on the ears, that for several moments he

thought he saw the stars falling about him. But no sooner had this sensation passed away, than he caught up a large, sharp flint, with the intent to hurl it at his aggressor, when a second blow, delivered by a much heavier hand, sent him reeling into the hedge. This came per favour of Squire Starlight himself, and as he was much too formidable an enemy for Master Tibbs to deal with, Master Tibbs slunk away howling, an admonitory kick from the same quarter sending his dog after him.

What grave results will often spring from trifles ! how slight are the links in the chain of human events ! the impulse, which makes us turn right instead of left, may lead to fortune or the reverse, and a box on the ear administered to a spiteful child, may be the cause of—but I must not anticipate matters.

Master Tibbs, and his dog, and the cat, were all forgotten by Stella the moment she saw who it was that had come to her aid. But was *that* indeed Thomas—her Thomas ? the man to whom she had pledged heart and hand ? What had become of

the kind smile, and the gentle voice, with which he always greeted *her*, although others found him rough and overbearing? If they had been married, and for a twelvemonth, he could not have looked more sternly indifferent.

This change did not come altogether unexpected; his three weeks' absence from Woodbine Cottage, in place of his usual daily visits, had led her to fear that something might be wrong; and yet she would not believe the whole truth in all its dreadful reality before—nay, she would not believe it now, even when he stood there with it so plainly written in every feature; she was like a watcher in the night, who forcibly closes his eyes to shut out some frightful phantom, which he knows all the time is at his side. If he proved false to his promises, good Heavens! what was she? It would not bear thinking of, far less talking of. She crushed it down—down—down upon her heart, and there it lay coiling and stinging like some serpent; but though the cold dews stood upon her forehead, and her cheeks

were pale as death, she forced a smile to welcome him.

"You are a sad rover, Thomas—three weeks away from me! I almost thought you had forgotten the way to Woodbine Cottage."

"Three weeks, is it? I didn't know it was so long. Well; now I am here, you don't look over and above pleased to see me."

"Indeed you are mistaken," replied Stella, gently.

"Am I? you have an odd way of showing your pleasure then."

"Aye, but Thomas," and she again compelled herself to smile, as she said it, "I have been watching many a weary hour, like the lady in the ballad, for the false knight who never came, and like her I may now say,

"Should not that my brow cloud over?"

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"What, the ballad?—granted; sad doggerel it

is, no doubt. But the watching is all true, nevertheless. You cannot imagine how uneasy I have been at your absence."

"I don't know why you should."

"Oh, Thomas!"

How much of fear and agony, dashed with the slightest possible shade of hope, was in that simple exclamation. Her eyes too were filling fast with tears.

"That's the trick, is it?" said the Squire, sullenly; "it's time then for me to be off."

She caught hold of his arm.

"Well," he cried "if you must play the fool, don't let it be here so close to the house; we shall have some one popping out upon us presently, and catching you at this eye-work. Come along up the lane. Oh, never mind your bonnet: it an't cold; and if it is, tie your handkerchief about your head."

The lane in question was just such a retreat as any lonely rambler would have chosen in summer-time, being nearly half a mile in length, and com-

pletely shut out from the meadows on one side, and the corn-land on the other, by thick hedges of briar, holly, elder, and hazle-nut, that grew on the top of high mounds. Even now it afforded a tolerable screen, and began to show signs of spring: the banks were profusely sown with primroses, and more especially wherever the stump of a felled tree shot forth its thin twigs, though why they should choose such a neighbourhood in particular, is more than I could ever make out; but there they clustered; and, where they showed themselves more sparingly, the double-daisy was seen in bloom, or the early willow-grass flowered, or the yellow coltsfoot opened its blossoms; while on the sunny side of the way the gnats were buzzing, and eddying round and round, like so many motes in the sunbeams. The lane terminated in a mill-stream, over which was a slight, wooden bridge, connecting it with the copse beyond, where the green woodpecker might be heard at work, and the wood-lark, idle songster as he was, amused himself with carolling away the

morning's brightness. Altogether it was a pleasant spot for those who were in the right humour to listen to the birds, and admire the wild-flowers, plucking one here and there, that grew brighter or greener than its fellows. But both Stella and her companion had their own moody thoughts to hearken to,—imagination that could make themselves heard without voice, and that would be heard too, though a tempest had been singing in their ears.

They had nearly reached the end of the lane without a word having been uttered, for the one had as much reluctance to tell, as the other to ask, what was yet uppermost in the mind of both. At length Thomas came to a sudden halt, with the manner of one who has made up his mind to something that he would willingly avoid.

“It's of no use putting it off any longer,” he began; “you must hear it some day, and as well now as to-morrow, or a month hence.”

“Not yet,” exclaimed Stella, again catching the

arm he had withdrawn from her—" for mercy's sake, not yet. I know too well what you would say—but not yet—it would drive me mad."

" Oh, very well ; as you please ; only don't go by and by and tell people I sneaked off, and was afraid to let you know my mind."

And again he was about to leave her, when, as if rallying all her energies for the occasion, she exclaimed,—" Stop ! I have been weak—Heaven knows how weak !—but it is all over now. Say what you have to say."

" Oh, you have altered your mind, have you ?—Well, I don't so much blame you for that ; no one can be always of the same way of thinking."

Stella smiled bitterly, but made no reply.

" There was something like a promise of marriage between us—that is, not exactly a promise, but a talk of some such thing if ever times suited."

Again Stella smiled, and more bitterly than before.

" But men now adays don't marry for love, if they can do better. This is a bustling world, girl, and

they who'd get on it, had need look sharp about them. So you see, though I may be as fond of you as ever, my marrying you is out of the question."

"You mean then to desert me?" said Stella without lifting her eyes from the ground, and with a painful slowness that showed how much each word cost her in the utterance.

"Who talked of desertion, fool? you know better than that comes to. When I was a—that is, when I was not so well off as I am now—no one could ever say of me that I was close-fisted, and I'm not likely to turn miser with Taunton Hall at my back. No, no; I'll not desert you."

"I don't understand you—at least I hope I don't—for your sake I hope I don't.

"For my sake! what the devil do you mean by that?"

"For your sake," she repeated yet more earnestly; "if we part thus you may rue it before the sun goes down."

"Is that meant for a threat?" said Thomas, not

altogether sorry to have a pretext for being in a passion.

“ No threat, so help me Heaven !” replied Stella clasping her hands in an agony of tears ;—“ no threat, but truth—solemn, unalterable truth, if ever such a thing was uttered by the lips of man or woman.”

Thomas was evidently shaken—not much perhaps, but he *was* shaken—and his voice had a touch of the old time when he again spoke to her.

“ Why, you foolish girl, what nonsense is this ? Come, come, make an end of it ; and, since what’s past is past, let’s talk of the future.”

“ The future !” said Stella shuddering, and straining her eyes eagerly as if to pierce into the mysteries of the blue expanse above her.

“ There you are again,” cried Thomas. “ Upon my soul, it’s too bad ; and”—he swore a savage oath—“ I won’t stand it another minute.”

“ One word—only one word ; your promise—yes, or no ?”

“ No !”

He was going off, but turned back again, after a few paces, of his own accord.

"Come, Stella, don't be a fool in this business. Ask anything else you choose, and have it—there's my hand upon it."

But she recoiled from his proffered hand in silence ; speak, she could not ; every faculty of mind and body was concentrated upon one master-passion, and that one was—despair.

Again some thought of the past, or some misgiving of the future, seemed to make Thomas waver. It was only for a moment though. Hardening his heart, and pressing the hat more deeply upon his brows, he turned from her, and went his way without another word.

With a fixed stony gaze, Stella watched him as he sauntered up the lane. Was it assumed or real indifference ?—he whistled—aye, whistled—as he went, and from time to time made a cut with his stick at anything near him—switched off some protruding twig from the hedge, or some taller weed

than usual from the bank, but always without stopping. Will he not once look back?—no; he has turned the corner of the lane—he is out of sight now.

A sort of darkness came over Stella—not the darkness of night, but as when the deep shadow of a cloud rests upon the bright fields—and sitting down upon the stump of a tree she wept aloud.

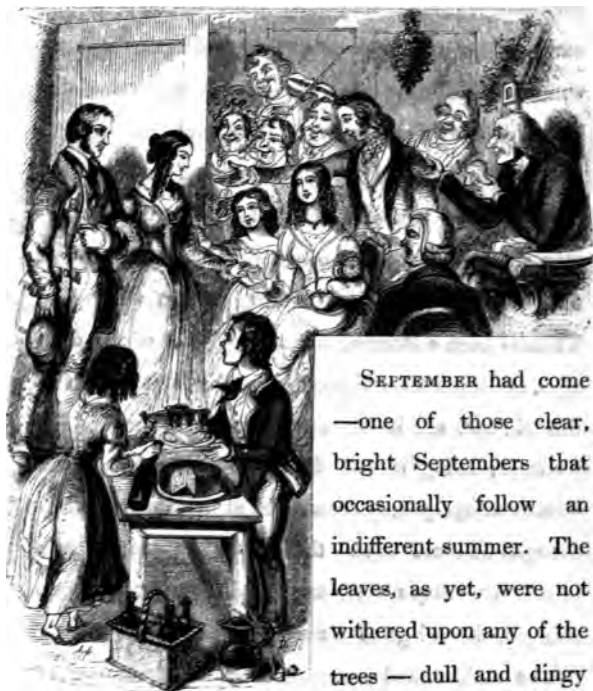
People talk of the relief of tears, but it must be when they fall gently and kindly, like an April shower, not when despair calls them forth from the recesses of the heart. If they relieve at all, it is the relief of exhaustion, and then they subside into convulsive sobs, and low moans, that tell how pain has worked upon the spirit—how it still endures, but how feeble it is to express its endurance. And such was the state of poor Stella. She felt so cold too! so very cold. Though the day was warm and bright as ever, she actually shivered, and made a motion as if to draw her shawl more closely about her, seeming much surprized to find she had none on. In the

confusion of her mind she thought it must have dropped from her shoulders, and was looking vacantly around for it, though still without moving, when her wandering gaze was arrested by the sight of a face that peered out at her from the hedge close by. There was no mistaking the ugly features of the boy Tibbs, nor the malicious grin upon them. It told, as plainly as any words, that he had heard and seen everything, and meant to revenge his late blows by publishing the whole far and wide. The light above did not shine more clearly upon the fields and meadows than it would upon her shame before the day was over.

There wanted but this in her state to drive her to that momentary frenzy, which is not called so only because it passes away with the occasion that gave rise to it. Mad she was at the time—mad as the wildest maniac that ever clanked fetters in a cell, or howled wolf-like at the moon. Uttering shriek upon shriek, she rushed full speed to the mill-stream ; a loud plash, as of a falling body was heard ; and the troubled water, just where the sun was sparkling brightest, eddied

round in circles, that went on widening and widening till they were checked by the banks, when they broke into tiny ripples. Then there was a slight undulation only—a gentle upheaving of the smooth surface—and the little stream glided on as merrily as ever in the sunlight.

THE GHOST.



SEPTEMBER had come —one of those clear, bright Septembers that occasionally follow an indifferent summer. The leaves, as yet, were not withered upon any of the trees — dull and dingy

only, and that not in all cases; the oak and the lime did, indeed, show very much like travellers after a dusty

journey ; but the ash, the hawthorn, and the chestnut looked bravely still, and some few of the latter bore a singular testimony to the roughness of the preceding season ; they had been blighted in the early part of the year, had shot out again at Midsummer, and were now covered on one side with leaves of the brightest green, and even exhibited a few blossoms, while the opposite half had all the barrenness of winter. This, of course, is no common sight ; but it does occur now and then, and it did occur this year—in Taunton Park, to wit. Had Thomas been a Roman, or even a Baron of the dark ages, he might have appropriated this phenomenon to himself, and set it down as a special augury of his fortunes ; living in the days of steam coaches and electric telegraphs, he marvelled at it once, and then thought no more about the matter. But it is time to cast a retrospective glance, and see what has been doing in the village of Gander.

The sudden and unaccountable disappearance of Stella had excited a general commotion in the neighbourhood. The first idea of many was that she had

been murdered; but by whom? what interest could any one have in so cruel an act? and besides, where was the body? Then it was surmised by certain old ladies, of tart aspects and tarter judgments, that she must have run away with some one; but here again they were at fault, when they came to ask themselves with whom. Upon calling over the muster-roll of Gander and its vicinity, not a soul was found missing, except Master Tibbs; and though the coincidence might be strange, it would have been yet stranger if Stella or any one else had eloped with such a little monster, and he, too, quite a boy. Now the truth was, this young gentleman, being more suspicious than well-informed in the ways of the world, had conceived a dim notion that having been the only person present at the act of suicide, he might somehow be made a party to it, and get hanged for murder. He therefore took this opportunity of carrying out a long-cherished scheme of his, which was to run away from school for good; and as he had no relation but an uncle, who cared little

whether he lived or died—or, indeed, would rather that he died, to get rid of an incumbrance—no very long search was made after him, and he was soon entirely forgotten.

Next, to amuse the gossips, came the election; and when *that*, in turn, had ceased to interest them, they found ample room for speculation in the increasing splendour of Thomas Starlight, Esquire, and Lord Mildew's courtship of Fanny under his especial sanction. If at any time they tired of thinking—or talking rather, for they were not much given to thought upon any subject—if then they tired of talking on these matters, they had only to look at Woodbine Cottage, where the blind old man was pining slowly away in his silent and unowned sorrow—no, not altogether silent; I was wrong in that. He would talk for hours of the missing one to Fanny, and she, good little soul, would visit him almost daily, and forget her own grief in listening to his, and endeavouring to console him. Perhaps, too—for in the best of us something of self will

mingle with our care for others—perhaps she found the task all the lighter and pleasanter from Frank's calling regularly on the sick man in his rounds. At last, Frank was weary of it—weariness that is of being tantalized, weary of hoping only to be disappointed, and not a little alarmed lest he should lose his affianced bride altogether.

“ I'll put an end to it this very day,” he said to himself, on lifting the latch of the cottage door to pay his accustomed visit. “ It's not to be endured, and I won't endure it, that's—”

“ Gently, gently !” murmured a voice from within.

It was Fanny, who with a finger of one hand upon her lips, pointed with the other to the old man in his elbow-chair.

“ Is he asleep ?” whispered Frank.

Fanny nodded assent, and walking to him on tip-toe silently took his hand, and led him to the porch, where they could still watch the sleeper, yet talk without disturbing him.

“ It is almost time for me to return home,” she

began ; “ but nurse has gone up to the village on some errand of her own, and as I was here, I did not like to leave the old man by himself.”

“ Many thanks to nurse,” replied Frank ; “ and may her errand be anything but a speedy one. I have something to say to you, love—something very particular.”

Fanny looked all expectation, and the Doctor continued in his usual quiet, dry manner :

“ We must run away.”

“ Run away !” echoed Fanny.

“ And get married at Gretna Green.”

“ Good Heavens, Frank !—you are not in earnest ?”

“ In earnest ?—why, I have ordered the post-chaise.”

“ You must be jesting.”

“ This very night.”

“ Now, pray be serious.”

“ At nine precisely.”

“ Nay, but my dear Frank, it is unkind of you to joke in this way.”

“ If I did joke, it might be ; but who the devil—

I can't help swearing—who could look at that dear, pale face of yours, and that wasted figure, and think of joking?—not I, I promise you.”

“ Oh !” said Fanny, forcing a smile—how unlike her merry laugh when first we met her !—“ I suppose, then, you imagine that I am—”

She could not bring herself to say, *dying* ; but substituted for the hateful word—“ you imagine I shall soon be where they neither marry, nor are given in marriage ?”

An involuntary shudder came over her as she said it ; not that she was particularly fond of life—Tom's iron rule left her little cause for any such weakness ;—but who has ever seen that dark future really open upon him, and not felt his spirit quail ? the condemned felon shrinks from it,—the fever-smitten wretch, on his hot and sleepless couch, shrinks from it,—the hero dying in the arms of victory, shrinks from it ; how then should a young, and timid girl, resist its influence ?

And that shudder, slight as it was, had not escaped the quick and jealous glance of true affec-

tion, any more than the fact that she was dying—aye dying—slowly, but surely, of a broken heart. He started up from her side, exclaiming shortly, but decidedly,

“Fanny, love, this must not be;—it shall not; the scoundrel is killing you by inches.”

“Hush—hush, Frank; I must not hear a word against my brother.”

“You must shut your ears hard and fast, then,” replied Frank with increasing bitterness; “while you keep them open they will hear nothing good of him, go where you will.”

“Well, but for my sake—”

“For your sake I could wring his neck with the greatest pleasure in life, only it would be a downright robbing of the hangman. I tell you again that he is killing you by inches. Everybody sees it, every body is talking of it. Why won’t you give me a husband’s right to protect you?”

It was with a look so timid—so touching!—so full of eloquent appeal to all the better feelings of man, that she said in reply:

“And do you, Frank, my best friend—I might say, my only one on earth, now he yonder is broken by age and sickness—do you really counsel me to fly from my home?”

“Not from your home, for you have none; the poor creature, who is fretting away life in a common jail, might just as well call his dungeon a home, as you give the name to Taunton Hall; his bed may be harder, and his food coarser, but there is little difference beside. No, Fanny; I call that place home, where smiling faces and loving hearts are always ready with a welcome; I call that place home, where, when you sit by the cheerful hearth, you think as little of the world’s annoyances as you do of the storm which is beating against the window; I call that place home, where all your hopes and affections are garnered up as in a treasure-house. And such a home—I say it on the word of an honest man, who has inherited a fair name from his father, and hopes to bequeath it to his children—such a home, Fanny, you may have with me.”

The colour came back to her pale cheeks, and her eye kindled with its former brightness while he spoke; but when he ceased, the momentary impulse ceased too, and shaking her head she murmured sadly:

“No, Frank, no; it cannot be.”

“It can be—it must be,” replied Frank, decisively: “I don’t say for your own sake, for *that’s* what you never think of—anything, and anybody, except yourself—but for mine—for mine, dear Fanny. What do you suppose would become of me, if I were to lose you?—and I shall, if you don’t get out of that fellow’s clutches—at once too; there is no time to be lost.”

Fanny began to waver, though she still said, “No,” and begged him—but it was in so faint a tone!—not to ask her.

He only pressed the more. “She would consider of it.”

He grew angry. “She would let him know in a week—in a few days.”

Still he persisted. "Well then to-morrow—yes, to-morrow she would abandon home, brother, all, all, for him."

"To-night," whispered Frank; "to-night,"

"May Heaven forgive me if I am doing wrong!" murmured Fanny, and sank upon his bosom.

"Wrong?—little doubt of *that*, I fear. And yet—and yet it requires a tough heart,—tougher than I possess—to condemn you, my poor girl."

It was arranged between them—that is, Frank suggested, and Fanny did not say *no*—she only hung down her head, and gently pressed his arm—it was arranged they should meet by nine that night at Woodbine Cottage, under pretence of a visit to Elias, and there he would have a post-chaise ready to convey them to Gretna Green.

"But yonder comes nurse Margaret. And Elias too is waking. I dare not face him now, Frank, for blind as he is he reads my thoughts,—I cannot tell you how, but he does read them. Oh! what would the good old man think of me?"

"We'll ask him when we come back," said Frank gaily.

Fanny pouted; it was the prettiest pout imaginable, and she smiled through her tears, and then laughed a low, gentle laugh, and then blushed to think she could laugh at such a time, and then tripped off to avoid Margaret, leaving the Doctor more in love with her than ever, if such a thing were possible.

Her road lay by Caleb's smithy—the reader cannot have forgotten Caleb—where the fire was glowing and the hammers ringing merrily upon the anvil. Talk of drums and trumpets indeed! when they do their best, their sound is nothing to the cheerful clang of the blacksmith's hammer. And as to an illumination, all the lamps that ever burnt on a rejoicing night, green, red, blue, and yellow, with scores of sky-rockets to help them, are mere glow-worms in comparison with the blaze of the forge, showering about its sparks right and left, till it roars up in a pyramid of flame. So pleasant was it to the

eye, that Fanny involuntarily slackened her pace when she approached the smithy, to enjoy the cheerful scene; but hearing her own name mentioned she hurried on again. As, however, we have not her motives for delicacy, we shall make free to walk in, and the rather as we are like to find another of our old acquaintance there,—the cobbler namely, who figured on New Year's Eve at the Black Lion.

"I wish I could help her, poor thing," said the blacksmith in reply to the very remark that had just before reached Fanny, and caused her hasty retreat; "with all my heart do I; but I can't, so there's no use in talking about it. And to tell you a piece of my mind, neighbour Sands, if you were to use your tongue less, and your hands more, it would be all the better for you."

And forthwith he began hammering away most vigorously at a bar of iron, which his apprentice had just drawn red hot from the forge.

"You're precious changed," said the cobbler, "since you've got married."

"Very like," replied Caleb; "and I'm none the

worse but all the better for it. I work hard, mind my own business, leave other folks to mind theirs, and the little woman keeps all right and tight about me."

"Ah! you never go the ale-house now, not even for a pot of beer," said the cobbler mournfully.

"In course he don't," cried a shrill but not unmusical voice.

"Eh, Sis!" exclaimed the smith, wiping his brow with his leather apron; "brought my dinner already, lass?"

"It's past one," replied Cecily, a smart, bustling little woman, with a slight touch of the shrew, just acid enough to lend a flavour to the fruit, now that it was fresh and blooming, though in a few years hence it might not perhaps be quite so agreeable. Even as it was, the cobbler stood much in awe of the young wife; and whilst she busied herself in laying out her husband's dinner on a sort of tripod—something between a stool and a table—he tried to make her

forget the unlucky reference to the Black Lion by asking: "Have you heard of the ghost, dame?"

Cecily caught at the bait directly. No other subject—no, not even the talk of a new gown—could so soon have made her overlook the attempt to seduce her liege lord to the ale-house.

"Ghost!" she exclaimed trembling from head to foot with superstitious curiosity.

Caleb winked with one eye at the cobbler, while with the other he looked into the depths of his mug, preparatory to a second draught of the good liquor.

"Ghost!" she reiterated. "Who saw it?—what was it like?—when did it show itself?—where was it seen?—do pray tell us all about it! Gracious me—a ghost!"

"Miss Stella's ghost."

Even the smith started at this, and had well nigh dropped the mug from his hand, as he repeated the words—"Miss Stella's ghost?"

"Miss Stella's. I had it from Mother Stubbins—she what's nursing the schoolmaster up yonder.

Ever since the old man took to his bed, she has gone and haunted the cottage."

"My goodness!—Has this thing been seen often?"

"More than once—more than twice. One night—a black night pouring with rain—Meg dozed in the elbow-chair by the bed-side, when she was wakened up by a rattling at the window—'Bless my heart,' said she rubbing her eyes and gaping sleepily, 'what a stormy night it must be to shake the windows in this way.'—but on turning round, lo you, there stood the ghost of Miss Stella peering in; there was no mistaking who it was, for the wood-fire burned brightly just then, and its light fell directly upon the face."

"Goodness me!" exclaimed Cecily, lifting up both eyes and hands in wonder—"And how did she look?"

"Very pale and very wet—for all the world as if she had that moment come out of a mill-stream. But I always said she had gone and drowned herself."

"Not a bit the more for anything you have been

telling us," observed the smith. "It rained hard you know, and I dare be sworn your ghosts feel the rain as well as live folks."

"Can't answer for *that* exactly; maybe aye, maybe no; I should rather think not though, seeing as how they must be pretty well used to damp beds after lying in the earth so long."

"Yes, yes!" cried Cecily; "quite right, neighbour Sands; but go on:—the next time Meg saw the ghost?"

"The next time was, when she was sitting in the little parlour that leads off the bed-room. The door between the two was left ajar, so that with one eye she could watch her treacle-posset on the fire, while with the other she gave a glance from time to time at the old man in his bed."

"Aye, aye," said the blacksmith; "trust Meg for looking to herself, let who will be dead or dying."

"Now do let's hear the story out," said Cecily. "Go on, neighbour—and then?"

"And then it seemed to Meg all at once that the fire burned uncommon blue; and she began to feel

queer—monstrous queer—and such a fit of the trembles got hold of her she thought it must be the *aguy*; so she put an extra drop of brandy into the posset to comfort her old body.”

“The drunken jade! I can guess what follows.”

“No, you can’t—leastwise, you *don’t*, if you think as how she was in liquor. Not she, poor soul; she hadn’t time to do more than just wet her lips when she heard a groan from the bed-room.”

“And *that* frightened her into fits?”

“No, it didn’t. She took a quiet sup of her posset without moving, and thought to herself, ‘how bad the old gentleman seems to be to-night; I shouldn’t be a morsel surprised if he died afore morning.’”

“Cool however!” said the blacksmith.

“As a *cowcumber*,” replied neighbour Sands! “bless you it takes a deal to stagger her. And yet for all that she was staggered—a regular floorer too. When the old girl had done her posset, thinks she ‘I may as well see what’s the matter wi’ schoolmaster,’—and never trust me if there wasn’t the ghost again, wail-

ing and wringing its hands by the bed-side, as though it had been alive and merry—no, I don't mean that exactly—but just as any one of us might do if so be we were in trouble."

"Hi ! hi ! hi !" laughed a voice outside the smithy.

"Mercy on us !" screamed Cecily in no slight trepidation—"what's that?"

"Neither a ghost nor a devil," said the smith coolly ; "but something a sight worse nor either of them ; it's that rogue of a barber."

"The barber without the rogue," cried Master Simon, creeping from behind the door—"hi ! hi ! hi !"

"You, is it ?" said Cecily, in a tone of more than usual snappishness. "And couldn't you show your ugly face at once, and not go about to frighten folks ?"

"*That's* it, dame," replied the barber.

"That's what ?" retorted Cecily.

"Why if, as you say, I had *showed* my ugly face at once, it might have frightened you ; so I let you

hear my voice first, that you might not—hi ! hi ! hi !
—that you might not take me for Miss Stella's
ghost."

" Or for the other personage, which would be
more likely."

" A great deal more—hi ! hi ! hi !—a great deal
more. And how are you all to-day ?—but first and
foremost, how is pretty Mistress Cecily ?"

Pretty Mistress Cecily tossed her head, disdaining
any other answer ; the cobbler grinned, and grunted
something about *leather*, but whether he used the
word professionally, as applicable to boots and shoes,
or in the metaphorical sense of beating and drubbing,
might admit of question ; as to the sturdy smith, he
eyed him from head to foot in a manner that was not
at all pleasant, when, having finished his survey—a
pretty close one—he said in the deepest tones of his
deep voice, " It's a pity you an't a little younger,
and a great deal stouter."

" Very kind of you," replied the barber—" very
kind indeed."

" Not a bit of it," retorted Caleb, "and I would'nt

have you think anything of the sort. When I wish you younger and stouter, it is that I might have the pleasure of giving you a good whopping ; as matters stand, you are such a feckless, wizzened old chap, one's half ashamed to lift a hand against you."

"The more luck mine," chuckled the barber—"especially if it happened to be such a paw as grows at the end of that long arm of *yourn*, friend Caleb."

"Don't call me, friend," said the smith angrily !
"I'm an honest man."

"And pray, friend—beg your pardon—Mr. Caleb—what do you take me for ?"

"A rascally spy, if you will have it."

"A spy !—hi, hi, hi—that is a good joke."

"Is it ?—well, only take care, good as it is, it don't some day or another cost you a broken head, for *that* any how won't be a joke. But stand out of my way ; here comes Jack, ostler, with a pair of nags to shoe. How's all with you to-day, Master Gibbs ?"

"Pretty bobbish," replied the ostler ; "no great cause to grumble, that I knows on."

"That's well," said the smith. "Brought the greys to be shoed again?"

"Yes; and I wish as how you'd take the job in hand at once. Doctor's just been sending up to our house to order the chay for nine percisely."

"You don't mean Doctor Meden?" said the barber quickly.

"I'm sure I don't mean t'other one—old Squills;—and if we has any more of them pottycarries sort hereabouts, it's more nor Jack Gibbs ever heard tell on."

"Home with you, that's a good lass," said Caleb, almost pushing his wife out of the smithy; "I can't help thinking of kisses instead of work when your pretty face is so near me."

"Well, upon my word!" exclaimed Cecily.

"If you stop another minute, as sure as you wear a head on your shoulders I'll kiss you."

The threat was not a very terrible one, but it set Dame Sis a scampering; and the smith, beginning to bustle about among the nails and horse-shoes called to his apprentice, "Now, Bill, look sharp there with

the nags. Work to-day, and play to morrow ; that's the way to grow rich, boy."

" And where's the Doctor bound to in such a hurry ?" asked Simon in his most insinuating tones.

" How should I know ?" replied the ostler ; " some distance I guess though, for Tim—that's the boy, what carries the doctor-stuff about—"

" Aye, aye," interrupted the impatient barber ; " we all know him—better than we wish to do."

" Well, it was he who brought the order for the chay ; and he said as how he heard young Meden telling the old one—Squills, you know—that perhaps he mightn't be back for three or four days, and then they both set to a laughing like a pair of good uns."

" Ha !" exclaimed the barber.

There was something in the tones of this exclamation that made Caleb look up from his work, and demand rather angrily, " What the devil do you stand there for, bothering folks with your questions as though you was an Old Bailey lawyer ? it's nothing

to you, I reckon, which way the Doctor choses to ride ; he doesn't owe you anything, does he ?”

“ Now don't be so cantankerous, Caleb ; it's as natural for us barbers to ask questions as—hi, hi, hi—as it is for you blacksmiths to be grimy.”

“ Very like. But, grimy or not grimy—and that's no business of yourn—if you'd been after pumping me as you have Jack ostler, I'm blest but I would have soused you in the horse-pond.”

This was an awkward hint, and Mr. John Gibbs seemed a likely man enough to act upon it—there was no saying ;—he had rather a vicious temper of his own, acquired, as some people imagined, by keeping company too much with horses of bad character. Simon therefore deemed it a matter of prudence not to give him the opportunity, and having laughed one of his gentlest “ *hi hi's*” all round by way of leave-taking, he shuffled off at a tiny trot, *that* being his only pace between a walk, slow time, and a run at full speed.

“ There he goes !” said the smith ; “ and for a

pin's head I could throw my hammer after him. The rascally spy ! he's off for Taunton Hall to carry everything to the Squire that you've been ass enough to tell him !"

"Think so?" said the ostler.

"Sure so," replied Caleb ; " couldn't be more sure if I took my bible-oath on it."

"Then, by the Lord Harry, the first time he comes near our stable-yard he'll knap it ; the horse-trough first, and a nice rubbing down with the curry-comb arterwards."

"And if he comes to my shop," said the cobbler, "I'll serve him with strap-oil, and plenty of it. Heart o' man ! won't I larrup him?"

In the meanwhile the object of these benevolent intentions was on the look-out after Tim, from whom he hoped to gain a little more intelligence with regard to Frank's movements. The straightest way would have been, as he well knew, to go to the shop at once, but then he was so little of a favourite with the journeyman or either of the two apprentices that he did not dare to venture in. This became the

more vexatious when, on taking a hasty peep between the glass-globes that nearly blocked up the window, he caught a glimpse of Tim's red poll moving to and fro, or of something very like it. There was no remedy, however, but to wait till the boy came out, which he must do some time or another.

Having come to this undeniable conclusion, the barber amused himself with pacing up and down the street, until he began to think his amusement somewhat of a bore. Then he took to leaning against the post at the corner—a very favourite recreation with that class of bipeds, which in zoology occupies the same relative place that the *venus-cup*, or *catch-fly* does in botany, being called the *catch-man*, or *catch-pole* more commonly. Here he relieved his back quite long enough to observe many little peculiarities in the street that he had never noticed before, though bred and born in the village. One stone in the pavement, just where he stood, was blue; and the window in the gable-end of the house opposite, had a green bull's-eye near the centre; and Widow Hill's house was higher

by a foot, at least, than the Doctor's; and the knocker on the attorney's door was iron.

"I could have sworn it had been brass," said the barber to himself. "Well, after *that*, I don't think I'll be positive again about any thing."

Then he fell to counting the panes of glass at the grocer's. This being rather a complex operation, he had to go through it more than once—more than twice—before he could quite satisfy himself there was no mistake, so that by the time he felt convinced the grocer had six panes more than his neighbour on the right, and three less than his neighbour on the left, the Doctor's door opened. In another moment Tim made his appearance, basket in hand, for one of his multifarious duties was the taking *out* of the medicines, which the patients were to take *in*, for the benefit of the doctor as well as of themselves.

Tim being once caught, it was no very difficult matter for so astute a personage as the barber to extract from him all he knew, and perhaps something more; but that was of no consequence;

you can't expect the grain without the chaff, till you have winnowed it. With the exception, however, of one little fact, this amounted in substance to no more than what he had already heard at the smithy—the chaise was to wait for Frank at Woodbine Cottage. Now at first sight there would seem to be nothing to excite any one's suspicion in a doctor, of all men, wanting a chaise, and just as little in his ordering it to meet him at a patient's; but the Squire of Taunton Hall had long since made up his mind that the lovers would elope if they could; it was the one thing to be watched for—to be guarded against as a settled matter, that only wanted time and place. No wonder then if the barber, who was always seeking, should be always finding, whether to the purpose or not. Old Squills might have ordered a coach and six, and he would have thought nothing of it; but a chaise and pair for Frank had Gretna Green in the very creaking of its wheels, and must be reported to his employer.

However long Squire Thomas had been expecting

such an event, he was not the less enraged upon its being announced to him as a thing that really was to happen before the day was over. He chafed and stormed like—it would be hard to find a likeness, few things being so capable of expressing rage as himself. For the first ten minutes nothing would satisfy him short of knocking the offender on the head, like a mad dog; in the second ten minutes, he thought it might be sufficient if he cropped his ears, or otherwise set a mark upon him for life; in the third part of the half hour, he had subsided into the gentlemanly resolution of calling him out, but with a proviso of six feet, and no more, between the muzzles of their pistols. At length it occurred to him that none of these plans was likely to secure his chief object—Fanny's consent to marry Lord Mildew. No, to harm Frank, in any way, would never do—then what would?

“Hi, hi, hi!” croaked the barber, who was bursting with impatience to tell the rest of his story, but had not dared to speak until his patron's face showed signs of returning fair weather.

"You have something more to tell me," said the Squire, eagerly: "don't be afraid, man; I'm cool now."

"I was only thinking—hi, hi, hi!—of this queer talk about the ghost."

"The ghost, idiot?"

"Miss Stella's ghost. Nurse Margaret saw it three nights following; and says she's sure it came to tell schoolmaster he was to die, for it was in a sad taking all the time."

"And what's that to me? what have I got to do with the man's living or dying?"

The barber was silent; his love of gossip had brought him upon dangerous ground, and he felt it.

"There's something else; I can see it by that hang-dog face, so you had best not keep me waiting for it."

"It an't I that say it," replied the barber, evasively.

"Say what, you blinking old raven? say what?"

"That you have—"

"Aye?—"

"That you have—"

"Made away with the girl, I suppose?"

"If your Honour pleases."

"Pshaw!" cried the Squire, contemptuously ;
"they'll say next I'm a Kentish Bluebeard, and keep
a seraglio of women without heads."

"Hi, hi, hi!" croaked the barber, faintly, to
express how absurd he too deemed the report.

For several minutes the Squire again sank into
what is emphatically termed a brown study, though
in this particular instance it might have been termed
a shade or two darker,—indeed, with a strong ten-
dency to *black*—for he was devising how best to
entrap Fanny, it being one thing to stop her elope-
ment, and another to make her accept Lord Mildew.
Timid and yielding as she was in general, on this
point she showed a spirit which was alike proof
against threats and persuasions. But he, also, was
determined, and with the advantage of a brain
fertile in expedients, and no delicacy to stop him in
the choice of them. So he pondered and pondered,

and the furrows of thought deepened and deepened, till they could cut no farther unless they had been able to wrinkle the bone itself. Just as it might have been thought they were about to try this experiment, they disappeared as suddenly and completely as if a flat iron had been passed over his brow and smoothed them every one out, when, switching his boot with infinite glee, he exclaimed—

“Famous! a capital idea!”

The barber was astounded.

“Much obliged to your friends for their good opinion of me; it has put a scheme into my head. Bah! what an ass I was not to think of it before. In one week from now Fanny marries Lord Mildew, and with her own consent too. What do you say to that, Simon? you lying, spying, peddling, barbering old rogue, what do you say to that?”

“Hi, hi, hi!” responded Simon.

“Hi, hi, hi, indeed! can’t you laugh out for once, like a man, with such news as this to help you?”

Anxious to accommodate himself to his patron’s

changing mood, the barber did try at a laugh; but it was all to no purpose; he could not for the life of him get beyond his usual thin, thready, "Hi, hi, hi."

"Oh, confound your croaking," exclaimed the Squire; "if you can't do anything better than that, off with you. And mind you keep a sharp look-out after that infernal Doctor."

The barber bowed, and shuffled off, as we must do, to see what Frank is about.

He had been his usual rounds without making any worse mistake than the transmission of a blister for Mrs. Hogg's scalded foot, and a bottle of soothing syrup for the miller's dropsy, which, all things considered, was doing exceedingly well, and long before the appointed hour he was ready for Woodbine Cottage.

"I wish I had told Fanny six instead of nine," he said to himself; "it's almost dark enough, already. What could I be thinking of?"

The hours passed on slowly—very slowly; yet they did pass, and night succeeded with her usual

punctuality to sunset, but in a very sulky fashion, for she had left the moon and the stars behind somewhere—the astronomers can best tell where.

Nine o'clock came.

Ten o'clock came.

And still Frank was waiting alone in Woodbine Cottage; that is, the lady had not appeared, and in the absence of his mistress a true lover is always alone, even though, as in the present case, a sick man may be close by in his bed, and a nurse dozing in the elbow-chair at his side.

"It's very strange," muttered Frank, looking up to the clock for the hundredth time, and then assuring himself by a comparison with his watch that there was no mistake. "What on earth can have detained her? nothing gone wrong, I hope."

Eleven o'clock! Is not that a step upon the loose gravel? Yes, and the door-latch is slowly lifted—but it's dropt again, as if the person who held it was half afraid to enter.

"Fanny!" cried the Doctor, starting from his seat and hurrying to the door.

No; it was only the postboy, who finding it very cold and dull waiting in the road so long, had chosen to fancy that he heard himself called.

“Called?” re-echoed the Doctor, “what should I call you for? one of us, I suppose, must look to the horses, and I have no mind that one should be myself. But stay; you seem to have got a fit of the shivers, so here’s a right Havannah for you; it will keep the cold out better than any dram.”

The post-boy touched his hat, and retreated with the lighted cigar, internally hoping, however, that he might never again have to drive a doctor;—“unless,” he added, relaxing into a grin, “it’s down below; and then I’d back him in, and leave him.”

Twelve o’clock!—still no signs of Fanny. It was exceedingly disagreeable, to say the least of it. If the lady had changed her mind,—though *that* is a thing ladies very seldom do—she might have sent up a message to say as much, and not kept him waiting there all night long, to make a fool of him.

“I’ll wait no longer,” said Frank, clapping on his hat decisively, and pressing it down upon his brows, like a man who had taken his resolution, and nothing

should alter it—"not another minute. I'll go—I'll go to the Hall, and see if I can pick up anything."

But neither the time nor the darkness were at all favourable to the picking up of ought save bumps and thumps against stray posts or over wandering stones, with an occasional dip into the ditches which lined the road on either side. When he reached the Hall, a dead silence prevailed about the whole place; the building, clothed in shadow, had a grim, sulky, mysterious look with it that seemed to say, "strange things are going on here—I know *that* well enough; but you'll get nothing out of me, so you need not hope it." Of all its Argus eyes—the windows to wit—there was only one that was not as blind as if its sight had been put out by the window-tax; and even that one kept up a feeble, ill-omened winking and blinking, and then suddenly became dark as its fellows. It was evident that nothing was to be got by stopping after such an unequivocal hint of dismissal. If the house had been gifted with a voice—and there was a time when stones had ears, and danced to the lute of Orpheus—it could not have

more plainly said, "be off with you ; I'm going to sleep, and havn't a word for any one."

It will save a great deal of time—and we have not much of that commodity on our hands just at present—to suppose that Frank went to bed that night in a particularly ill-temper with every body, himself included ; that he dreamt all sorts of dreams ; some grotesque, as when he saw Taunton Hall dancing a hornpipe to the rattling of its own windows ; some serious enough, as when he fancied himself arraigned at the Old Bailey on a charge of matrimony, and being found guilty, was led forth to be hanged ; and finally, that by the morning he had slept off his doubts, and awoke to as full a confidence in his happy star as ever. In fact, he was quite another man from the angry, jaded, anxious creature of a few hours previous. Fortune, however, had not yet done with him. Just as he had made up his mind that all was or would be right, in spite of appearances to the contrary, the maid-servant entered with a letter. It was from Fanny. He knew *that* before he opened it, before he even looked upon the address, which none but the

finest crow-quill, managed by the most delicate fingers, could have accomplished. But at this point, the spirit of intuition deserted him. It did not tell him what he found within, written evidently with a trembling hand and blotted with tears—"he must think of her no more; she was to be married that day week to Lord Mildew."

Frank was thunderstruck. He read the note over and over again; he weighed every word, every syllable, with as much nicety as if he had been weighing out grains of calomel; but the result was still the same; and by no process of analysis could he arrive at the latent cause of all this mischief. What devilish art—for it must have been devilish—had Squire Thomas employed to bring about such a change? so sudden! so decided! and all the while there was no alteration in Fanny's love for him; she had expressly said as much in her note, and Fanny was incapable of falsehood.

"I'll see her, I'm determined, and ask the meaning of this. She *must* marry him, and dares not tell me why?—There's some foul play here."

But the Squire, who always had his wits about him, had foreseen the probability of such an attempt, and so managed matters as to make it impossible. For the whole of the week prior to the wedding-day Fanny seldom went abroad, and, when she did, he was constantly at her side, with the full determination of using violence if Frank crossed their path and attempted to address her. In fact, she was in the state of a besieged fortress, and, when he was off duty, Lord Mildew never failed to mount guard, having somewhat unwisely taken it into his head, that the best way to overcome her evident horror of him, was to be always at her elbow. It was martyrdom—positive martyrdom—of that kind, which some philosophers are disposed to treat lightly enough, as being only mental, but which, nevertheless, as much wears and wastes the body as any more material kind of torture, and occasionally ends in breaking a heart or so. No wonder then if after having endured the application of these mental screws and pincers throughout the day, she should cordially welcome night, which consigned her to the solitude of her own chamber.

It was such a luxury to be able to sit down and weep in quiet, with no one to interrupt her—no one to say, “why don’t you laugh, why don’t you talk?”—no one to watch, and ogle, and chatter nonsense which must seem to be listened to even if it were not answered. Pity though that this passive kind of enjoyment should always prove so fleeting. For the first few minutes, or even the first half hour, it was all well enough, but then came the thought she was so much nearer to the morning that would make her Lady Mildew,—a reflection which never failed to put an end to any short-lived dream of pleasure. With every night too this feeling grew stronger and stronger upon her till it reached an almost intolerable height on that which immediately preceded the bridal day. And yet grief was not the only, or even predominant, passion of the hour. Mingling with it, and by degrees overpowering it, was the fear that when it came to the last she might be found wanting in strength to accomplish the sacrifice; for, strange as it may seem, she was now earnest to be married to Lord Mildew—aye, as earnest as if she had not thoroughly detested him,

while every pulsation of her heart was a throb of love for the man she had deserted.—Mr. Thomas had kept his word.

The night was flying fast, and still poor Fanny continued to be a watcher. In her restlessness she could not sleep—she could not even bear the thoughts of bed—but paced up and down her lonely chamber. And yet we should not call it lonely; for the thoughts, which crowded upon her heated brain, had begun to assume a shadowy distinctness and filled the room with life and motion. The chair by the fire, in which she had been sitting a moment before, was occupied to the eye of fancy by her father, the corn-factor. And there too sate a bright-eyed little woman with a child at her feet—herself;—and the fond mother parted the ringlets from her young brow with a loving hand, and talked of the day when she might be a happy grandmother, at which her husband laughed, and smoked on with redoubled zest. Then as these images would dim away, and before they had quite faded, others would rise upon them, like the shapes in a dissolving view, and gradually put them

out. But, often as they changed, Frank was still the most constant figure—not in one place, but in every part of the room—pale, sick, broken-hearted,—beseeching her even at this moment to remember all her promises—to have pity on him—on herself, for would she not be wretched,—past words to say how wretched—if she married Lord Mildew?

How often in the course of that night did Fanny's resolution waver, in spite of all her struggles and self-reproaches! And now, that it wanted but a short time to day-break, how much fainter had the voice of duty grown, and how much stronger the throbbings of her heart!

She looked out upon the night. No one was awake but herself and the little stream that still went on in its ceaseless course, never resting, never weary. At other times she had loved to watch its bright, merry ripples over the pebbles, but now she only thought how it would still flow on when she was dead.

The leaf too that was withering upon the topmost bough of the lime-tree—the last, the only one left

upon it—which would be the first to fall? that leaf, or herself?

Never did suppliant kneel at chapel-shrine with more earnestness of prayer than she now knelt at Heaven's highest altar, the blue sky itself, lit up as it was with a thousand starry lamps—never did suppliant pray with a deeper sense of her own weakness to be upheld in the path of duty, than she now implored for strength from above in the fearful trial that awaited her. And was it not granted? did it not come?—not in the form of comfort, but in the shape of an awful warning, sent from the grave itself?—yes, there stood the pale shade of Stella in the moonlight—of her, that Thomas by his own confession had drowned in the deep, deep water, with no witness by, as he said, but Lord Mildew, who claimed a bride as the price of his silence. Fanny clasped her hands and fainted.

Morning came at length, and had it shone on the happiest bridal that ever entered the church-porch, it could scarcely have been a fairer one. The sun looked out brightly from a sky without a cloud in it,

while the few leaves left by autumn danced like so many fairies in the warm breeze. If ever nature indulged in a holiday, this certainly was one of them, and not the least either in her calendar.

“For whom are the bells tolling?” said Fanny to the girl employed in arranging the last portions of her bridal dress.

“Tolling, Miss!” replied the girl in amazement.

“Aye—don’t you hear them?”

“For goodness sake, Miss,” cried the girl, turning pale, “don’t talk so; they are ringing out a merry peal for your wedding.”

Fanny smiled—the aching heart has its smiles as well as grief—and said nothing.

The bridal train had assembled in the drawing-room; the victim—it can hardly in this case be called a metaphor—was decked out ready for the sacrifice; and the company had just risen from their seats to set out for the village church, when without any announcement in walked the mysterious stranger of the Black Lion, attended by Lawyer Gripe. Thomas started forward, and would have stopped him.

“ If you have anything to say to me—”

“ Something to say to you, and to all the good company,” replied the old man ; “ but to you first. A pretty fellow you are to talk about tyrants, and what you’d do if you had the power !—how you’d right this, and mend that, and make every one happy. Mercy on us ! there”—pointing to Fanny—“ there stands a nice specimen of happiness from your manufacture.”

“ I don’t know who or what you may be,” cried Thomas in high indignation ; “ but if—”

“ Tell him who I am Gripe ; tell him who I am.”

“ Ahem !” began the lawyer, “ this gentleman, my honoured client—”

“ Briefly, Gripe—briefly.”

“ Is your uncle, Mr. Christopher Cobham, the lawful proprietor of Taunton Hall, who—”

“ Who being a whimsical old fellow, full of crotchets and meagrimms, had a mind to see what sort of metal his nephew, Tom, was made of ; and a sad bit of Brummagem he has turned out—not a grain of silver

in his whole composition. Fanny, my dear niece, I have tried you too—somewhat too roughly perhaps ; but never mind, I'll make you amends ;—you are an angel. My Lord, I suppose you don't want the angel any longer, now that Squire Thomas is Tom the poacher again, or Tom o' Bedlam, or any Tom he chooses except Tom of Taunton Hall. His reign's up there, as Gripe, who has been in my confidence all along, can satisfy any who's in the least curious."

It would be difficult, and it is not necessary, to paint the scene of confusion which followed. The end was, Lord Mildew declared himself unchanged by anything that had past, and as desirous of the match as ever,—an avowal which surprized all present much more than it need have done ; in the first place it was owing to the dotage of an old rake upon a young face ; and secondly, his Lordship, who was a shrewd calculator, reckoned that sooner or later uncle Christopher would become sensible to the honour of his alliance, and bequeath at least the bulk of his property to Fanny. But uncle Christopher was really the odd character he had described himself, and totally

unmoved by so much magnanimity, turned to his niece :—

“Fanny, my love, it rests with you to say whether this match is to go on or not. Your brother in his utter worthlessness has lost all *right*—confound the word, I shall detest it henceforth for his sake—but he has forfeited his natural authority ; and I, as your uncle, and one better fitted by age and station in life to counsel you, request to know your wishes in this matter. Is the match to go on ?”

“I have no choice,” sobbed Fanny ; “it must.”

“No choice ?” exclaimed her uncle—“and *must* ? I say, it must not, and shall not, except with your express consent.”

Fanny took his hand, and kissed it eagerly, bathing it at the same time with her tears, but repeated, “I have no choice ; it must.”

“Some strange fraud has been practised upon this poor girl,” cried the old man, fixing a keen glance upon her brother, who returned it with a scowl of defiance.

“I will cut this matter short,” said Thomas with

his usual promptitude. "It seems we have no longer any right to remain in Taunton Hall;—be it so—Fanny, your hand; my Lord yours. Those who are my friends, or his Lordship's will follow us to church."

Ding, dong, ding ding dong—the bells never rang out a merrier peel. And did not the horses too prance, and toss their heads proudly to and fro as they bore along the bridal party!

Ding, dong, ding, ding dong.—Where's Frank? is it possible he does not hear these bells? and if he does, he ought to go and cut the bell-ropes. But is it possible that he alone is deaf to them, when all Gander, men, women, and children, as well as cats and dogs, have turned out and assembled at Woodbine Cottage? To be sure it did not seem as if they had come to welcome a bridal party; there was a strange commotion among them, so strange indeed that Fanny, who had been looking out of the coach-window the whole way—of course not to catch a last glimpse of Frank—eagerly exclaimed:

"What's the matter? Oh, what can be the matter?"

"Never mind," replied Thomas nervously alive to anything that might interrupt the projected marriage; "we can't stop for that now."

"Nay," said Lord Mildew gallantly, "I must not have my bride thwarted on her wedding-day. Stop, coachman."

There was a general cry, or groan, or shout, for the sound partook of all these characters, and the word "*dead*" might be heard running from mouth to mouth.

"Dead!"

Ding dong—ding, ding dong, roared the bells; "we can't stop in our mirth just now, but by and by we'll toll for you."

And Thomas was as hardened as the bells, for he stamped with impatience, and cried out furiously to the coachman to drive on.

The crowd, however, in the narrow way made this impossible, and they were too much intent on what was passing within the cottage to attend to the man's

entreaties for room to pass by. Then too such strange speeches, or rather fragments of speeches, were being bandied to and fro. "Not a ghost? Did you hear what Sam the miller said?—Are you quite sure?—How does she look?—Now do tell us Gaffer Martin."

Some of these sounds caught the quick ear of Thomas, and springing out of the coach, he contrived, though with some difficulty, to force his way into the cottage. And what a sight met him there! Elias dead in his arm-chair, and Stella—the living Stella by his side! In the depth of her grief, however, the poor thing did not see him—did not even seem to recognize his voice, when he spoke. He shook her gently by the arm; it was all to no purpose.

At first Tom was shocked, iron as his nerves were in general; but the feeling did not last long. There was pleasure, besides, in seeing that she still lived, that he had not been, as he really imagined, the cause of her making away with herself. Then, too, he recollected his fortunes hung upon the

moment ; a word from one of the crowd, all no doubt longing to tell the tale of Stella's return, would betray to Fanny the deception practised upon her, and even yet break off the marriage. This was not to be endured, and he endeavoured to force his way back to the carriage ; but the people showed no disposition to accommodate one they so much disliked, and did all they could in a quiet way to impede his progress. In the meanwhile, Fanny had heard all—more even than he knew himself. The miller, from no feeling but the love of gossip, and quite unconscious of the effect he was producing, told how from his mill he had seen Stella fling herself into the stream, and had hastened to her rescue ; how, when she was restored to life, she had implored him not to say a word of what had happened to any one ; how, guessing at the cause, he had promised, and had even sent her to a married sister of his, some forty miles away ; and, finally, how the news of her grandfather's illness had brought her back, when from

shame she had kept herself concealed till now from every one except the miller.

Bewildered by what she had just heard, crushed and worn out, both mind and body, by the terrible excitement of the whole week previous, Fanny was incapable of action, or even of any distinct thought. She could not separate the things of yesterday from those of to-day, nor what she had dreamt for nights before from what had actually happened; and when Thomas flung himself into the coach again, and cried out, "On!—to the church!" she made no objection, only murmuring,—“She lives, brother! she lives!”

As to Lord Mildew, he thought every body about him had gone mad; but *that* was no business of his, so long as he got his bride.

Immeasurably cruel as the whole transaction was, Thomas never hesitated in his purpose for a moment, and the sacrifice was on the eve of being completed, when, suddenly, and as if he had been dropped from the clouds, the old man again stood amongst them.

"Stop, if you please, good folks; as the uncle of the lady I have a few words to say,—always craving your pardon, Sir."

This last was addressed to the clergyman, who bowed in some surprise, closed his book upon a finger of the hand that held it, so as to keep the matrimonial rubric still ready, and retreated a few paces from the altar-railing.

"Niece," he said, "I have come to give you one chance more. It's foolish, I suppose, to care so much for one who cares so little for herself; but I *am* a fool, and can't help it—wish I could. As, however, my words don't seem to go for much with you, I have brought a younger orator to help me out. Stand forth."

And at the summons Frank burst from the crowd of curious bystanders.

"Fanny!—my dear Fanny!—think once again before you say a word which never can be unsaid."

Fanny made no answer; she could not. But,

even then, when reason seemed on the very verge of leaving her, a flood of tears came to her relief, and she flung herself into his arms.

Ding, dong, ding, ding, dong.

Heart alive ! what a racket those dear old bells are keeping up !—tossing themselves to and fro like mad, and carolling much as some well-disposed family of giants might do in a good-humoured fit of intoxication. But ring on, my friends, ring on ; though you shake the old steeple for a thousand years, you'll never ring to a happier marriage than that of Frank Meden and Fanny Starlight.

Again we must lift the curtain—it is for a few minutes only—ere it drop on our shadowy favourites for ever !

January Eve had come round for a second time, since the memorable convention at the Black Lion : but under very different auspices. In the best room of Taunton Hall, was assembled as gay a party as any where gave a welcome to the season. First

and foremost, there was uncle Christopher, positively ten years younger than when we last saw him ; there was Fanny—we beg her pardon, Mrs. Frank Meden—trying to look grave and matronly, as became a wife of a year's standing and signally failing in the attempt ; there was the Doctor, his sarcastic properties considerably increased, without the least diminution of his good humour ; there was the clergyman, who had come partly on pleasure, partly on business, the latter having reference to a very small specimen of male humanity in the nurse's arms, then and there to be christened, Thomas—by the bye, both uncle Christopher, and Doctor Frank, had protested against this unlucky combination of letters, but Fanny had proved, as will sometimes happen in domestic affairs, that one is more than two, and had out-voted both of them by her single voice—and divers other guests there were, all very gay, of course ; and paying compliments to mama upon her baby, of course ; and telling papa how like it was to him, of course ; and doing all manner

of things, of course; but—excuse a bad pun, dear reader—by no means in a *coarse* way.

The wine and cakes were handed round, and every one was preparing to drink little master's health, when uncle Christopher cried out—

“Halt!—Not a drop of wine must be drunk, nor a morsel of cake devoured, till I have told you a little story.”

By this time the old gentleman had so well established his character for eccentricity, that if he had stood upon his head, instead of his feet, it would have surprized no one. A general clapping of hands, therefore, and cries of “Hear! hear!” welcomed this announcement.

“There was once upon a time,” he began, “a sad dog, called Thomas Starlight—”

“My dear uncle!” interrupted Fanny.

“Let your dear uncle say out his say,” retorted the old gentleman. “Now I, being an odd fellow, as you all know, took a fancy to try and humanize this Master Thomas—for the rascal had some good

points about him ;—so I made him Lord of Taunton Hall ; and he made a fool of himself, and something worse. Then I pulled him down a peg—many pegs—packed him off to America ; and a rare school that must be ; twelve months—only twelve months—and he has come back quite a reasonable Thomas.”

“Come back !” exclaimed Fanny.

“Mr. Frank Meden, will you be good enough to make that little woman of yours hold her tongue ? But I should add, in fairness, that his wife has had a share—a pretty large one, I fancy—in knocking the conceits out of that addle-pate of his. Ha, ha ! Master Frank, you won’t come in for the whole of my fortune, after all.”

“And believe me, my dear Sir, such news would be welcome, though I came in for nothing.”

“I do believe you, my dear boy ; and you too, saucy one, for your looks say quite as much as your husband’s words.”

Thereupon the old gentleman, who loved effects as well as any concocter of melodrama, clapped his hands, the folding doors flew open, and Thomas

was discovered, with Stella leaning upon his arm. Uncle Christopher was in ecstasy at the general wonder.

“Ha, ha!” he shouted; “I think I have surprised you all for once. But Stella, you dull rogue, you spoil every thing: you should hold out your hand and point to the ring upon your finger, or how the plague are the audience to know you are man and wife?”

Stella blushed, laughed, and did as the old gentleman directed.—And who would not have humoured him?

THE END.

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